

The lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty at  
Midwestern public institutions.

by

Diane Elaine Hinrichs

A.A., Neosho County Community College, 1986  
B.S., Kansas State University, 1995  
M.S., Kansas State University, 2009

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs  
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## **Abstract**

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In this qualitative study, I investigated the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty at Midwestern public institutions. The study sought to answer the following research questions: What are the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty working at Midwestern public institutions of higher education? Does the identity of sexual minority Christian faculty influence their pedagogy, institutional and departmental identity, student engagement and other areas of faculty work?

Utilizing interviews and a phenomenological approach, I sought to gather new information on the essence of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member and how the intersectionality of those identities manifests itself in their work. Five faculty members who identified as sexual minority Christian faculty met the criteria of the study and agreed to participate.

Based on the findings of this study, the essence of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member at a Midwestern institution is nuanced with experiencing a wide array of institutional acceptance both from inside and outside of their department and college. For most, but not all, being a sexual minority is a more salient identity than their identity as a Christian, but through attributive strategic self-disclosure, they most often present that identity on campus

through mention of their spouses or partners without hesitation in everyday conversation.

However, they all acknowledge the necessity – when not in the safe-haven of academia – to continually evaluate their openness and language during conversations with strangers. Most of the participants sought involvement in a Christian congregation, but all of those who did, had experiences of marginalization and feeling “less than.” While most of these experiences were not overt discriminatory actions or disparagements, they still impacted how the participants viewed the church. Those who had ultimately become involved in an open and affirming congregation felt accepted and relieved. Involvement in open and affirming congregations was immensely satisfying to those who chose such involvement. The findings of this study have the potential to assist campus administrators in examining the climate of their institution, colleges and departments to identify ways to develop more inclusive and welcoming environments for sexual minority Christian faculty members.

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
Dr. Christy Craft

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## **Dedication**

My dissertation is dedicated to my mom. Without your love and the values you taught me, this degree would only be a dream.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty at Midwestern public higher education institutions. I became interested in this topic due to my personal identification as a sexual minority Christian, my experiences as a classroom instructor in higher education, discussions with other sexual minority faculty members, and reading *The Quest for Meaning and Wholeness* by Lindholm (2014).

Christians in the United States and in other parts of the world enjoy freedom and privilege not experienced by followers of many other faiths. In spite of that privilege, lately Christians have begun to issue claims of marginalization and discrimination. Lindholm enlightened me to the disturbing experiences reported by Christian faculty and other faculty who held religious or spiritual beliefs in a higher power. I also read with intense interest about the differences that existed for sexual minority faculty compared to that of the overall population of a study completed by Lindholm (2014) with regard to religion. For example, sexual minority faculty were less likely to identify as religious than any other subgroup (p. 30), and sexual minority faculty registered as high scorers in the area of religious struggle (p. 155).

The combination of all the experiences listed above led me to seek out other research on the experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. My inability to find a single article focused on this important group of faculty members solidified my desire to focus my research on sexual minority Christian faculty. Because I believe that understanding the experiences of faculty who identify as such is important, I designed my study to gain that understanding.

In this introduction chapter, I will provide an overview of this study. This chapter will also provide a review and synthesis of the existing literature related to the experiences of faculty

in general and Christian faculty and sexual minority faculty in particular. Literature will not be included that discusses sexual minority Christian faculty, because to date, I am unable to find literature relating to this group of individuals. In this chapter, I will also provide a statement of the problem, the purpose and nature of the study, research questions, study limitations, and the need for and significance of the research. This chapter will conclude with a list of definitions and explanations of key concepts and terms used throughout the project.

Central to the mission of every college or university is a focus on teaching and student learning, which, in ideal circumstances, culminates in what is commonly referred to as student success. The research literature is laden with various theories, programs, and student orientation models that reflect how higher education professionals strive to promote student success (Oliver, 1993; Severiens, Meeuwisse & Born, 2015; van Herpen, Meeuwisse, Hofman, Severiens, & Arends, 2017). One factor that researchers have consistently identified as promoting student success is faculty engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Research shows that student-faculty engagement is most effective when the faculty member is of the same or similar racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background as the student (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). Fairlie, Hoffman, and Oreopoulos (2014) found that having faculty representation of under-represented races or ethnicities comparable to that of the students not only increased academic achievement but also increased student persistence. Similar to students who are minoritized by race or ethnicity, sexual minority students have communicated that they highly value the interactions they have with sexual minority faculty, and they attributed their academic success to those interactions (Garvey, BrckaLorenz, Keely & Hurtado, 2018; Linley et al., 2016; Woodford & Kulick, 2015;). In the

aforementioned studies, sexual minority students also expressed an increased feeling of support and encouragement from sexual minority faculty.

Although students highly value interactions with faculty of a similar race, ethnicity, and/or sexual identity, research indicates that faculty do not adequately represent the diversity found in university student populations. For example, in 2015, the *Digest of Education Statistics* (2016) reported that students of color account for slightly more than 45% of the total number of students enrolled in postsecondary education. In the same report, the data showed that less than 30% of the full-time faculty members in these same institutions were faculty of color, indicating a racial disparity between students and faculty.

I suspect that the same disparity exists between sexual minority students and faculty representation. Unlike racial minorities, there are few reliable ways to measure the sexual minority population. The Williams Institute (2016) estimated that in the United States, approximately 3.8% of the population identifies as being a sexual minority. However, given the personal nature of identifying as sexual minority and the ability to hide sexual orientation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the exact numbers of sexual minority students or sexual minority faculty involved in higher education.

Some institutions are recognizing the deficient representation of minoritized faculty, and in response to the growing number of minoritized students and the desire to provide a more diverse experience to all students in higher education, some have created programs and initiatives to attract and hire a more diverse faculty (Wilson, 2016). However, despite the increased desire to seek out and employ a more diverse faculty, most institutions find it difficult to recruit and to retain minoritized faculty (Johnsrud & Heck, 1998; Phillips, 2002; Salazar, 2009; Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004; Wilson, 2016). For those faculty who do

remain, their work experiences reflect invariable themes of alienation, inequality (in terms of work load and expectations), and a consistent atmosphere filled with microaggressions which hinder their job satisfaction (Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, & Frey, 2009; Phillips, 2002; Salazar, 2009; Wilson, 2016).

Some sexual minority faculty face similar challenges as those of other minoritized identities and are faced with encounters related to heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is defined by Javaid (2018) as the “normalization of heterosexuality,” (p. 84) a place wherein heterosexual privilege is embedded into all aspects of social structure. All other sexual identities are viewed as subordinate to the heterosexual identity, thus hierarchicalizing it as the superior way of being (Javaid). Sexual minority faculty often experience a lack of legal protections that are otherwise afforded to female faculty or to faculty of color (Reybold, 2014). For example, faculty of color and female faculty are federally protected from discrimination based on their race or sex; the same is not true of all sexual minority faculty. Protections for sexual minority faculty vary from state to state and from institution to institution. This variance is experienced through the denial or removal from employment due to their sexual identity, or through failure to receive “trailing spouse” benefits. Experiences such as these make the employment experiences for sexual minority faculty more volatile than those of other faculty members (Reybold, 2014; Steward, 2003). Like other minoritized identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender), within the course of their work, sexual minority faculty often face microaggressions, hostile work environments, and inequitable workloads. While not the focus of this research, it is also important to note that sexual minority faculty of color and/or female sexual minority faculty face compounding issues due to the intersectionality of the multiple marginalized identities of race, gender, and sexual identity (Reybold, 2014; Vaccaro, 2012).

Unlike the experience of faculty who are minoritized by race, gender, or sexual identity, since the beginning of higher education in the United States, individuals identifying as Christian have generally experienced acceptance due to their religious identity. In earlier times, it was often mandatory to identify as Christian to qualify for a faculty position (Thelin, 2004). However, recently, some Christian faculty have begun to describe their work environments as hostile and a place where they must keep their Christianity hidden. Similar to faculty minoritized by race, gender, or sexual identity, some Christian faculty have described experiences of being denied advancement opportunities, of having their research minimized if it involves religion in any way, and some even reported being considered “unintelligent” due to their Christian beliefs (Craft, Foubert, & Lane, 2011; Lindholm, 2014). Lindholm (2014) found that experiences such as these are more prevalent within the hard sciences and in public institutions but noted that this was not exclusive and that faculty from religiously-affiliated institutions described similar experiences.

Given the overwhelming impact of Christianity and Christian customs in the United States, one would expect Christians to feel welcome and accepted in nearly any environment in this country. Yet, more and more, Christians are describing instances of discrimination and hostility, especially in the realm of higher education. Parent, Brewster, Cook, and Harmon (2018) conducted a study that included Christians throughout the United States. In the study, the researchers found that a significant number of Christians perceived themselves to be a minoritized group, reported levels of stress associated with this perception, and shared their experiences of faith-based discrimination similar to other minoritized groups. While only a small portion of the sample for the study represented faculty members, given the diversity



represented in their participant sample, it is reasonable to conclude that their results would be transferable to Christian faculty as well.

It would seem that sexual minority Christian faculty might represent a uniquely minoritized group on the college students of today and university campuses. Given the historic and current discriminatory and marginalizing experiences of sexual minority faculty and the negative experiences recently identified by Christian faculty, sexual minority Christian faculty represent a unique subset of the higher education population, one that does not clearly fit within other minoritized groups. Sexual minority Christian faculty also represent a minoritized group for which each of the represented identities (sexual minority and Christian) can be at odds with the other due to the beliefs of many Christian denominations that same-sex relationships are incompatible with the teachings of the bible. A significant amount of scholarship is devoted to the impact that some Christian beliefs and practices have on sexual minorities and the various ways in which sexual minorities reconcile their Christian identity with their sexual minority identity (Barber, 2015; Dahl & Galliher, 2010; Deguara, 2019). Literature on the experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty is very limited; in fact, as mentioned earlier, I was unable to find any literature on the group. Given the dearth of research along with the substantial amount of evidence about the impact that faculty members have on students in general and upon the college and university campus as a whole, more research is needed that explores the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Sexual minority Christian faculty are a unique subset of college and university faculty, yet very little is known about them. Lindholm (2014) described faculty as playing “a central role in determining both the culture and the climate of their institution” (p. 8). Like other faculty

members, sexual minority Christian faculty contribute to the overall culture and climate of their institutions, and their engagement with students might be a significant factor in student success and retention, especially for sexual minority Christian students. For instance, Adams (2013) found that sexual minority students in Christian colleges often credited faculty with aiding their identity work as sexual minority Christians. In the study by Adams, the faculty members were not sexual minorities themselves, but they still played a role in the identity development of the students. Linley and colleagues (2016) found that sexual minority students reported that “simply knowing that one or more sexual minority faculty members were open about their sexuality, or ‘out’, gave them a sense of belonging” (p. 59). Moreover, Sherr, Huff, and Curran (2007) found that Christian students felt that faculty who exhibited an active pursuit toward their relationship with Jesus Christ sought to develop relationships with students, and were able to display competence in the curriculum as well as in the integration of faith elements into the curriculum which created learning environments that resonated with the students they were teaching. Given the examples above, one would expect the presence of and interaction with a sexual minority Christian faculty member to influence the identity and sense of belonging for sexual minority Christian students.

Further exploration of the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty has significant worth and value to higher education administrators due to lack of research exclusively related to sexual minority Christian faculty and the impact that they have on their campus, within their department, and in the lives of students. Given the lack of literature related to sexual minority Christian faculty, to begin the exploration of their lived experiences it is likely best to complete an examination of the lived experiences of other minoritized faculty. While this

journey will not explain everything, it most certainly will provide insight and reference toward areas of interest that should be explored.

Both historically as well as in the present time, minoritized faculty have not fared very well in comparison to white male faculty (Flaherty, 2016; Hassouneh, Lutz, Beckett, Junkins, & Horton, 2014; Reybold, 2014; Turner, 2002). According to NCES (2018), 76% percent of all faculty identified as white and less than 25% identified as faculty of color in 2016. Overall 41% identified as male and 35% as female. A significant, yet unsurprising, statistic from that data is that 55% of tenured or tenure-track professors in 2016 were white men, and collectively, white faculty accounted for more than 83% of these positions.

These statistics have implications. For example, Louis et al, (2016) found that Black faculty members regularly experienced racial microaggressions and often avoided colleagues and the office environment in general due to the stress it caused them. Croom (2017) reported consistent accounts by Black woman faculty of experiencing demeaning remarks in regard to their pursuit and acquisition of tenured positions and shared numerous stories of inequitable treatment during the tenure process. One participant in the study by Croom was asked to submit and resubmit her materials multiple times. With regard to gender identity, Rivera (2017) found that academic departmental hiring committees often took into account the relationship status of women but not those of men. Furthermore, Guarino and Borden (2017), through their analysis of two national data sets of faculty surveys, found that women had higher service loads than men, especially when the department head was a man.

The underrepresented women and minorities who do break into the professoriate have consistently described their experiences negatively. Aguirre (2000) described the academic climate for women and minorities as “chilly” and “alienating” (p. 3). In research by Reybold

(2014) data revealed similar themes, documenting ongoing sexism, racism, and homophobia experienced by faculty members in a variety of different institutions and departments. Research shows that the experiences of women and minorities in the professoriate have left many feeling alienated, ostracized, and unjustly treated. In many cases, these experiences resulted in the faculty eventual departure of faculty members from either the institution or the professoriate altogether. Faculty members who remain in such environments often describe feeling unsupported, overworked, and unable to research the topics that are important to them (Reybold, 2014). Given the documented experiences of marginalization and the lack of acceptance of sexual minority faculty (Reybold 2014; Vaccaro, 2012) and Christian faculty (Craft, Foubert, and Lane 2011; Lindholm, 2014), it is reasonable to believe that sexual minority Christian faculty might experience the same marginalization.

Research on Christian faculty and sexual minority Christians typically highlight their inability to fully fit into either group. Lindholm (2014) documented experiences of Christian faculty feeling marginalization from multiple groups. One faculty member stated, “Most of my colleagues are not very religious, and they tend to see my practices/beliefs as simplistic. Conversely, my church friends see me as the crazy liberal person who believes in full inclusion” (Lindholm, p. 143). Sexual minority Christians have long experienced a dissonance between the messages they received from their faith communities and their experience of having same-sex attractions. While more churches have become open and accepting, there is still a significant stigma attached to being both a sexual minority Christian (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015).

Many minoritized faculty, either by race or by sexual identity as well as some faculty who identify as Christian, continue to describe their work environments as hostile and unaccepting, causing many faculty to leave these types of environments (Lindholm, 2014;

Reybold, 2014). This departure results in the department needing to seek out a replacement. When institutions must fill a vacant faculty position, the costs can be substantial. In 2015, the University of Idaho compiled a report entitled *Costs of Hiring New Faculty*. In that report, Pendegraft (2015) estimated that when the time and effort of the hiring committee and administrative staff are included, a university spends nearly \$12,000 in the search process alone. Moving expenses averaged \$7,000, and start-up costs ranged from \$2,500 to \$600,000, depending on the college and department. An additional, undocumented cost to the institution is the opportunity cost. When experienced faculty are replaced with new faculty, it typically takes an average of three to five years before a new faculty member can fully contribute to the department or college.

Faculty have a tremendous impact on all aspects of an institution. Hiring new faculty is expensive and time-consuming. Therefore, it is imperative that administrators understand the triumphs and challenges faced by all faculty members in order to develop a culture of inclusivity and acceptance that allows any faculty member the opportunity to achieve success without the fear of marginalization. This is one of the primary reasons why this study about the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty is important.

### **Purpose and Nature of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the work experiences, work relationships, student relationships, pedagogy, and other factors associated with faculty work of sexual minority Christian faculty through the theoretical lens of intersectionality in order to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. Through the design and implementation of a phenomenological study, using in-person interviews and open-ended questioning, this research will fill a gap in the literature pertaining to this group of faculty. This

study will provide rich data on the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. With the information gained through this study, higher education administrators will be better equipped to address the needs of a unique population of faculty, providing insights and understanding into how to create an inclusive and supportive work environment.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that will guide this study are as follows:

1. What are the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty working at Midwestern public institutions of higher education?
2. Does the identity of sexual minority Christian faculty influence their pedagogy, institutional and departmental identity, student engagement, and other areas of faculty work?

### **Need and Significance**

Over the past decade, significant changes have occurred in the status of sexual minorities in the United States. The abolishment of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 2013 led the way for the Supreme Court of the United States in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) to grant same-sex couples the right to marry anywhere in the United States. Both events created significant turmoil in state legal systems (*Marie v. Mosier*, 2014), in some religious communities (Russo, 2016), and in the workplace (Bailey, 2016). Higher education was in no way immune to these challenges (Gjelten, 2018); however, many colleges and universities were already providing same-sex partner benefits and had nondiscrimination policies in place that provided protections to sexual minorities (Bollag, 2007).

Despite *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), some anti-sexual minority legislation occasionally continues to be passed (Lovino, 2019; Tauss, 2019; Ura, 2017), and sexual minority Christians

face unique challenges. During the process of the submission and the resulting debate regarding such legislation, sexual minorities are bombarded with newspaper articles, news broadcasts, Facebook posts, and a host of other public and private sources. The continuation of these legal actions and the subsequent publicity causes sexual minorities, a group that is already marginalized, additional feelings of devaluation and degradation (Riggle, Thomas, & Rostosky, 2005). For sexual minority Christians, insult is added to injury, as findings show that there is a direct positive correlation between the number of Evangelical Protestants in a state and the number of anti-homosexual initiatives (Scheitle & Hahn, 2011). Therefore, depending on the denomination of which a sexual minority Christian is affiliated, they can literally be sitting next to and donating money to organizations that are working to develop and to pass legislation that will limit the rights of sexual minorities. This reality causes a significant amount of cognitive dissonance for sexual minority Christians. Due to their experiences, and the change of doctrine in some Christian churches, sexual minority Christians have recently become the focus of research. Barton (2012) found that identity conflict frequently occurs as sexual minority Christians experience Christian religious norms that reject the concept of the compatibility of a sexual minority with the teachings in some churches about same-sex behavior. At the same time, sexual minority Christians are being barraged with messages from the sexual minority community that identify Christianity as the root of most injustices subjected onto sexual minority individuals (Boswell, 1994). Despite this growing body of literature, little if any research exists on the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. Given this lack of information, it is problematic to assume that higher education administrators are even thinking about how to create environments that are conducive to sexual minority Christian faculty being able to thrive.

Likewise, it is doubtful that these same administrators would understand how outside supports or detractions impact the well-being of sexual minority Christian faculty.

Higher education in the United States was founded by and for Christian men (Thelin, 2004). As secular institutions emerged, even they were heavily influenced by religious thought and rhetoric. State-sponsored schools often required daily chapel and services on Sunday (Nieli, 2007). For many years, faculty were expected to subscribe to the predominant denomination of the school, or at the very least, to profess a Christian faith (Marsden, 1996). Due to such requirements, it is obvious that faculty who held a Christian identity felt welcomed and accepted. Conversely, sexual minority faculty did not have the same experience. Faculty who were caught in homosexual acts or who were simply believed to be associated with individuals who had been caught engaging in homosexual activities were immediately terminated (Dilley, 2002). Because the strictest code of silence was required to be a sexual minority faculty member, very little is known about how being a sexual minority impacted the work of faculty members.

In higher education today, we see a stark difference from its Christian origins, not only in state institutions but also in private Christian institutions. For example, in 2015, John McAdams, a tenured faculty member at Marquette University, a Catholic University, was fired for criticizing a student teacher and asserting that she was trying to impose liberal views by not allowing a student to voice opposition to same-sex marriage. The viewpoint of the student was the same as that held by the Catholic Church, the founding entity of the school (Jaschik, 2015). McAdams sued Marquette, and in April 2018, the Wisconsin Supreme Court decided in favor of McAdams (Herzog & Vielmetti, 2018). Similarly, Lindholm (2014) found that faculty who subscribed to a higher power, whether they were Christian or espoused another religion and who



worked at a variety of higher education institution types, were often subjected to ridicule or disrespectful comments regarding their faith.

The influence of identity on the performance of faculty both inside and outside of the classroom is undeniable. Lindholm and Astin (2008) found evidence to support that a faculty the spirituality of faculty members influenced their approach to classroom teaching. Their spirituality led them to conduct a more student-centered learning environment in the classroom. Faculty also discussed the concept of showing mercy and grace to students. Similarly, Skelton (2000) identified several ways in which gay faculty drew upon their identity and experiences of their sexual orientation when approaching their teaching. Those tactics included empathy of being an outsider and the ability to pick up on cues that reflected the emotions and feelings of students

Both Christian faculty (Lindholm & Astin, 2008) and sexual minority faculty (Skelton, 2000) have expressed that their identity influences their teaching pedagogy, their engagement with students, and their relationships with other faculty and administrators. Skelton posited that all facets of faculty work are impacted by a faculty member having a minoritized identity. Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect that the work of a sexual minority Christian faculty member is impacted by each identity and the intersection of the two. In addition to gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of these faculty, through this study, I will take the first step in gaining insight about the influence these identities have on faculty work.

### **Definition of Terms**

For this research study, the key terms are defined as follows:

**Bisexual** – A person who is sexually attracted to both males and females (American Psychologist, 1991).

**Christian** – One who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ (Sanders, 1980).

**Gay** – For the purposes of this study, the term *gay* is predominantly used to describe men whose sexual orientation is such that they are attracted to other men (American Psychologist, 1991).

However, occasionally in Chapter 4, female participants used this term in reference to themselves or to other females. This choice of words had nothing to do with how the female participants define their gender identity, but rather, that they find it easier to use the word *gay* as a universal description of people who have same-sex attractions.

**Heterosexism** – A term first introduced by Morin (1977), which he defined as “beliefs and attitudes that do not equate the value of same-sex lifestyles and opposite-sex lifestyles” (p. 117). It is important to note that, although I am quoting the originator of the term heterosexism, in the language today the use of this term is precluded as well as the word *lifestyle* to define the essence of being a sexual minority.

**Homonormative** – A label developed by Duggan (2003) to explain the dynamics of the change that occurred in homosexual politics and in the thinking of many homosexual individuals from a subversive model of promiscuity, militant queerness and flaunted sexuality to a more “normalized” heterosexual character who possesses the qualities, wants and desires of the “model citizen,” except for their selection of a same-sex partner.

**Lesbian** – A homosexual woman. The word *lesbian* is also used to describe women in terms of their sexual identity or sexual behavior regardless of sexual orientation, or as an adjective to characterize or associate nouns with female homosexuality or same-sex attraction (Zimmerman, 2003 p. 453).

**Minoritized** – This term describes an exclusionary social process that exists because of a systemic social order that subjugates individuals into underrepresented and disadvantaged

categories (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Similar to Hoffman and Mitchell, Harper (2012) explained the term minoritized in this way:

People are not born into minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context (e.g., their families, racially homogenous friendship groups, or places of worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness. (p. 9)

**Sexual Minority** – In this study, sexual minority is used to refer to any individual who identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. When referencing other studies, the term sexual minority may include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Often it is used to describe anyone who does not prescribe to the sexual orientation of heterosexual (Galupo, Mitchell, & David, 2015).

### **Summary**

For faculty, the identity intersection of being a sexual minority and a Christian is complex and nuanced by identity memberships that are often in conflict with one another. Regardless of any complications experienced because of this intersection, sexual minority Christian faculty step onto campus and into their classroom day in and day out wearing their identity uniforms. For some, a given identity uniform resembles that of Clark Kent, with his Superman uniform securely hidden as he goes about his daily life, but always ready when needed. For others, all of their identities are like Ironman, with multiple suits, but interchangeable parts. The role of higher education administrators is to develop productive and cohesive colleges and departments that are made up of faculty who are all different. Therefore, the more knowledge and understanding administrators can gain in regard to their faculty the higher the odds of having a cohesive and supportive environment that promotes faculty research

and student learning. This study will help provide additional information on sexual minority Christian faculty who are but one part of this unique set of individuals.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **Overview**

The primary goal of this chapter is to present a review and analysis of relevant literature that will frame an understanding of the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. The chapter begins with an overview of what it means to have a minoritized identity and a look at currently documented lived experiences of minoritized faculty. Following this overview, in this chapter I will look at the historical controversy that exists between Christianity and sexual minorities and reflect on the current status of this controversy. Given the lack of research specifically on sexual minority Christian faculty, I will then present a review and synthesis of the research available on each element of this identity: minoritized identities, minoritized faculty, Christian faculty, sexual minority, and sexual minority faculty. The review of the literature on these various identities and identity combinations lays a solid groundwork for understanding the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. Lastly, I will describe the theoretical framework, intersectionality, which I have selected for this study. Developed in the 1990s, intersectionality addresses the impact that embracing multiple marginalized identities has on the overall identity embodiment of individuals (Crenshaw, 1991).

### **Minoritized Identities**

Individuals embracing minoritized identities refer to those who, due to one or many aspects of their identity in any given time or space, are subordinated due to being immersed into a culture or group that is different than their identity or identities. This difference can be based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion or any other identity area in which, at a given time, groups can be identified as dominant and subordinate (Harper, 2012; Ray, 2005). Minoritized groups are those groups that may not represent a numerical minority but, due to

racism and historical and institutional oppression, experience exclusionary treatment by dominant groups (Chase, Dowd, Pazich, & Bensimon, 2014). Several groups of researchers have described individuals who have experienced reduced power, position or opportunity due to their sexuality and gender as being minoritized (e.g., Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015; Pazich & Bensimon, 2014).

Minoritized individuals do not always experience this minoritization in every moment or aspect of their life; this is particularly true for people with invisible minoritized identities, such as sexual or religious minorities. In fact, the term minoritized is utilized to describe identity salience that exists only in times when the individual is found to be a part of the non-dominant culture (Harper, 2012). In other words, an individual experiences a minoritized identity more profoundly when coming into contact with groups or others who believe or treat that person as though they are less than (Harper, 2012). Therefore, when people discover themselves in a situation where one or multiple held identities are found to be in the minority, they often become more aware of that identity regardless of the status they hold within or outside of the group. Gillborn, Vincent, and Ball (2011) highlighted the complexity of this distinction by utilizing President Obama as an example. Despite the fact that President Obama was the most powerful man in the United States and the leader of the free world, a distinction that by itself would imply being part of the dominant culture, as a black man, he was consistently compared to the dominant cultural standard, which was that of being a white man.

### **Christianity and the Controversy with Sexual Minorities**

Christianity is a religion that was founded more than 2,000 years ago. The religion is centered on Jesus of Nazareth, who is also commonly known as Jesus Christ. Christ was born a Jew and lived his life as such, fulfilling the Jewish laws of that time. As a Jew, the teachings of

Christ were typically based on the Torah, which consists of the following books from the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (Judaism, n.d.). The teachings of Christ provided additional elaboration and escape from the necessity to fulfill all the “laws” set forth. Christ taught of salvation through faith in him, because all the Jewish laws had been fulfilled by him on behalf of everyone else (Spear, 1890).

The Christian religion utilizes the Bible as its foundational source. The Bible is a book that is made up of two parts: The Old Testament and the New Testament. The first part is called the Old Testament by Christians and includes the books of the Torah. The Old Testament covers the time beginning with creation and up to the birth of Jesus Christ. Often the readings from the Old Testament are called “the law” because they contain the religious laws laid out for the Jews by God (Spear, 1890). The second part of the Bible is considered the New Testament. The New Testament contains writings centered on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This Testament is most often referred to as the gospel (Grant, 1963). Even though Christianity is centered on Jesus Christ himself, the combination of the Old and the New Testaments are the authoritative guide for many Christians. For example, in their document titled *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (1973) described the acceptance of both texts as authentic and applicable:

We believe, teach and confess that since the same God speaks throughout Holy Scripture, there is an organic unity both within and between the Old and New Testaments. While acknowledging the rich variety of language and style in Scripture and recognizing differences of emphasis in various accounts of the same event or topic, we nevertheless affirm that the same doctrine of the Gospel, in all its articles, is presented throughout the entire Scripture. (p. 6)

According to Hackett and McClendon (2017), Christianity is the largest religion in the world today, accounting for more than 31% of the population in the world today. In the United States, the percentage is even greater, with nearly 70% of the population identifying as Christian. Within the Christian population, there is enormous diversity. The United States Christian churches can be divided into three distinct groups: Protestants, Catholics, and other. Those in the other category represent a small portion of the group and are comprised of denominations such as Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Orthodox. Catholics make up more than 20% of the U.S. Christian population, and Protestants account for more than 51% (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017).

Further disaggregating Christianity, Protestants can be additionally divided into three categories: evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and historically black Protestants. Evangelical Protestants share the belief that a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. They also place emphasis on bringing others to faith in Christ and on the inerrancy of the Bible. Nearly all evangelical Protestant churches originated as part of the reformation movement that began in 1517. Mainline Protestants share a more inclusive view on achieving salvation, which includes acts of kindness and dedication to social justice, and a strong emphasis on social reform. In many cases, the mainline Protestant churches broke off from evangelical Protestant churches, choosing to develop a new denomination. Historically black Protestant churches are unique. Often their messages reflect their experiences with slavery and segregation, through liberation theology. Those experiences uniquely shaped their religious perspectives and practices (Copperman, Smith, & Ritchey, 2015).

While this complex breakdown of the various categories within Christianity might seem tedious, it becomes tremendously important when attempting to understand the messages received by sexual minority Christians regarding their sexual identity. Each of the categories –



evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants and historically black Protestants – contains many denominations and synods. It is important to understand the messages sexual minority Christians receive from their churches and how those messages shape and influence their Christian identity. Finlay and Walther (2003) found that the level of religiosity, defined as the number of times a person participated in a church service or activity, was directly correlated to the level of homophobia held by that individual. Likewise, in most sexual minority individuals, a level of internalized homophobia exists or has existed due to their early socialization and religious upbringing (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982).

Much diversity exists with regard to how sexual minority individuals who identify as “Lutheran” are treated within their churches. For example, a sexual minority individual who identifies as “Lutheran” would most likely have a different experience if they are affiliated with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) as opposed to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). The LCMS stance on homosexuality and same-sex marriage is that it is “intrinsically sinful.” Within the doctrines of church discipline, sexual minority individuals can face excommunication or other forms of church discipline and may be prevented from participating in the church sacraments, such as Holy Communion. In contrast, in *A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009), the ELCA asked congregations to “welcome, care for, and support same-sex couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection” (p. 19). In addition to this example, within the Lutheran denomination, there are other synods, some which fall in the evangelical Protestant category and others that fall in the mainline Protestant category. Those in the evangelical Protestant category include the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), the American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC), the Church of the Lutheran Confession

(CLC), the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), and the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC). Those in the mainline Protestant category include the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Synod (ELCA), the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), and other smaller groups that maintain the mainline Protestant church traditions (Pew, 2015). This example shows that despite the similar “origin” of the denomination (in this case Lutheran), divisions have occurred, making a church that is a part of the ELCA potentially more similar in belief structure to a church affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA) synod, than it would be to a church in the LCMS. While the previous information illustrates how the Lutheran denomination is structured, similar structures exist within many other Protestant denominations.

Since Christianity is rooted in Judaism, it is not surprising that many traditions and laws were kept as part of the Christian faith, while other traditions were discarded. The Orthodox Jewish religion prohibited same-sex acts (Leviticus 18:22, New International Version) and called for those involved in such acts to be put to death (Leviticus 20:13, New International Version). It is further believed by some that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of the displeasure of God with same-sex acts (Genesis 19, New International Version). It is also important to remember that most, if not all, of the New Testament apostles/authors, though devout followers of Christ, were originally of the Jewish faith and therefore were significantly influenced by the Old Testament laws and readings (Boswell, 1981; Crompton, 2003).

Christianity came into being during a time when Rome ruled the world. In the Greco-Roman culture, same-sex relationships and same-sex acts were commonplace (Boswell, 1994). Saint Paul the Apostle, is considered by many to be the founder of the Christian church. Paul is believed to have authored 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament (Gardner, 1911). In the letters of Paul to the Romans, to the Corinthians, and to Timothy, Paul denounced those involved

in same-sex acts as being unworthy to inherit the kingdom of God (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:9-11, New International Version). As the Roman Empire began to fall and as Roman rulers were replaced by Christian rulers, the influence of the church became more dominant, and the law of the land more closely resembled the law of the church (Crompton, 2003). As such, laws banning same-sex acts became common and carried with them penalties of death (Boswell, 1981; Crompton, 2003). The negativity toward same-sex acts and unions continued through the middle ages and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the United States, many individuals, religious groups, and governing bodies have struggled, and continue to struggle, as they attempt to reconcile personal beliefs, religious beliefs, policies, and practices pertaining to the sexual minority community. Most notably, in recent years, the landmark Supreme Court case, *Obergefell v. Hodge* (2015), which guaranteed same-sex couples the right to marry, sparked a renewed vigor on the part of non-affirming Christian denominations, synods, and churches to protect what they believe to be the truth about sexual identity issues. Following this decision, the United States saw much legislation regarding religious freedom, including the right of employees, businesses, and professionals to withhold services to people based on religious beliefs, and the right of individuals holding government offices to withhold services based on their religious beliefs.

This conflict has been felt not only within the sexual minority community and the Christian community, but also in organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). Historically, the BSA prohibited gay young men from participating in Boy Scouts. However, after *Obergefell v. Hodge* (2015), not only did the BSA reverse its long-standing policy, it also repealed the policy prohibiting gay men from being Scout leaders. In doing so, BSA cited that it believed this policy was becoming indefensible (Costa-Roberts, 2015). This action, in turn,

caused several religious denominations to dissolve long-standing Memorandums of Understanding held with the BSA.

Today, as one surveys the spectrum of beliefs and concerns held by the various Christian denominations and the government, the acceptance and treatment of sexual minorities has become one of the most divisive issues facing the leadership of these institutions. Church division began in 1968 when the Metropolitan Community Church held its first worship service, in the living room of Troy Perry in Huntington Park, CA, and became the first Christian church in the United States to openly accept and welcome sexual minority individuals (History of MCC, n.d.). Since that time, a continuum of acceptance has developed regarding sexual minority individuals among the Christian faith communities. In 1970, the Unitarian Universalist Association became the first mainstream religious group to recognize sexual minority clergy and laity (Cool-Daniels, n.d.). In March of 2015, the Presbyterian Church USA became the most recent Church in the United States to approve same-sex marriage (Goodstein, 2015). Between 1970 and 2015, the United Church of Christ, Unity Church, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), and Evangelical Lutheran Church of America have all come to accept and value same-sex marriage and those in committed same-sex relationships (Masi & Lipka, 2015).

On the other end of the spectrum, American Baptist Churches, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Southern Baptist Convention all have maintained their prohibition of same-sex marriage and consider many sexual minority individuals involved in same-sex relationships to be openly unrepentant sinners (Masi & Lipka, 2015). In February 2019, the United Methodist Church held a special session of the General Conference to determine how the denomination will move forward on the topic of ordaining sexual minorities and performing same-sex marriages and on

determining the denominational stance concerning whether homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teachings” (Jacobs, 2018, para 3). At this General Conference, delegates approved “The Traditional Plan.” Approval of this plan solidified the existing statements about homosexuality, same-sex marriage and ordination of sexual minorities, (Lovino, 2019). According to the Full Book of Discipline (2016) “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” (Homosexuality: Full Book of Discipline statements, Article IV first paragraph). Reactions to this vote have varied. Conservative Christian radio talk hosts have applauded the fact that a denomination has chosen not to follow the sexual revolution, while progressive United Methodists held emotion- and symbol-filled services showing their support of the sexual minority population and their disagreement with the vote (Poole & Brett, 2019). Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church. All of the synods that, in recent years, have chosen to accept sexual minority individuals and same-sex marriage have endured massive losses in membership, and many have become embroiled in property disputes and litigation (Bailey, 2015).

According to Tomlin (2006) the American Baptist Churches USA have consistently reaffirmed their belief that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” (p. 1). Tomlin (2006) documented that the denomination endured a split in 2006 in which the American Baptist Churches Pacific Southwest region voted to withdraw from the denomination due the refusal of the parent denomination to address the acceptance, by individual churches, of “unrepentant homosexuals as members” of the church (para. 4). In 2010, the North American Lutheran Church was formed after congregations broke off from the Evangelical Lutheran Church following a vote accepting noncelibate gay ministers (Associated Press, 2010).

Over the past two decades, legislative actions and judicial and executive orders have continued to fuel the controversy between sexual minorities and religious communities. In 2000, Vermont became the first state to legalize same-sex domestic partnerships. Since that time, the United States saw a repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) military policy. This policy was put in place in 1993 during the Clinton administration. The policy prohibited discrimination against or harassment of sexual minority service men or women, but in return sexual minority service members were not allowed to be open about their sexual identity. The repeal of this policy marked the first federally-recognized act of equality for sexual minority individuals. Several active duty and retired military chaplains held a press conference in 2010 and argued that such a repeal would impact their religious freedom and their careers as military chaplains (Montopoli, 2010).

Following the DADT repeal in 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) unconstitutional in *United States v. Windsor* (2015). DOMA was enacted in 1996 and allowed states to refuse to recognize a same-sex marriage granted in another state or country. The final judicial act came in June of 2015, when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples by both the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment. For many, this ruling was viewed as an attack on their faith, sending evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and other churches in search of legal advice on how to protect their religious freedom, and the ruling sent many ministers to the pulpit to denounce the decision.

Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in places of public accommodation based on race, color, religion, or national origin. Prior to the repeal of DOMA,

DADT, and the legalization of same-sex marriage, many municipalities and states added sexual orientation to their public accommodation laws. Before and after *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), the United States experienced many lawsuits on behalf of same-sex couples who were denied services by bakeries, wedding chapels, photographers, and various other establishments. These denials were based on a claim by owners that serving sexual minority individuals would violate their religious beliefs. Due to these lawsuits, many states hastened to either enact new Religious Freedom laws or to amend existing laws giving business owners the right to refuse services to sexual minority individuals based on their religious convictions. Religious Freedom laws are not new. In fact, the first Religious Freedom law was enacted almost unanimously by the federal government in 1999. The outcry over the new laws lies in the timing of the laws and the specificity of their wording, which implies intent to give private business owners the right to deny services to sexual minority individuals or couples based on religious beliefs. Given the complexity and multiple layers of the United States legal system, it is unclear what the ultimate outcomes will be, but these laws are yet another example of the conflict that exists between some Christian religions and sexual minority individuals.

### **Faculty Identity**

The study of faculty identity lacks a consistent framework and has more frequently been evaluated based on other identity memberships (Engvall, 2003). Beyond specific group identity membership, within the current research available on faculty identity, the majority of the literature examines the identity of a faculty member in terms of her or his academic field of study, department, college, and university (Alpert, 1985; Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Engvall, 2003). Wilkins (2007) found that faculty identity varied greatly based on the type of institution with which an individual was affiliated. Faculty affiliated with baccalaureate institutions

identified more with their institution than their academic discipline. Conversely, faculty at institutions with a graduate school and research institutions ranked identity with the institution to be the least salient and identity within their department to have the greatest salience. Levin and Shaker (2011) found that full-time, non-tenure track faculty embraced a hybrid and dualist identity; they felt like they belonged within their department and embraced a professional identity based on their teaching responsibilities but also felt marginalized due to the lack of input and influence they possessed within the department as a whole. Research on part-time faculty reinforces these findings. Thirolf (2013) found that over time, part-time faculty tended to lose their sense of identity as professional faculty members due to negative encounters with full-time faculty.

Quite possibly the most relevant research relating to faculty identity explored the importance of social identity theory. Social identity was described by Tajfel (1978) as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). Faculty, by their position, have the opportunity to hold group identities including, but not limited to, their membership in the institution, college, department and discipline. These faculty members are also navigating their social identities based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, marital status, and a host of subsets within the named categories.

Minoritized faculty in higher education have described their working environment as challenging. Many have felt unsupported and have described their environment as suppressive to their academic success and their career enhancement (Chesler, 2013; Vaccaro, 2012). Perez (2017) found that minoritized faculty experienced oppression and marginalization due to structural and systemic practices of exclusion. Accounts of inequity are not limited to any given



group of minoritized faculty. Rather, claims frequently come from faculty of color (Turner et al., 2011), sexual minority faculty (Stockdill, 2012), and female faculty (Reybold, 2014). Perez (2017) found in his research, minoritized faculty spoke of having to “prove” themselves to colleagues, of struggling with disrespect from majority and minoritized students alike, and of needing to use another faculty member to help advocate for them. Perez also found that faculty discussed challenges with the intersectionality experienced due to their multiple minoritized identity. Several had fears of being accused of being partial to students of their same race. One faculty member shared her need to take herself out of conversations about race or gender.

Salazar (2009) also found that minoritized faculty described feelings of invisibility, received inadequate mentoring, and felt devalued. Often, minoritized faculty experienced cultural taxation. This occurrence happens through the involvement of the faculty member in student advising and mentorship, serving on committees at all levels of the institution, and advising student groups. While this work can often be very rewarding, it extracts time away from other academic endeavors leaving the faculty member feeling worn out and exhausted. While all faculty members engage in service involvement at some level, minoritized faculty typically do so at a higher level; given their minoritized status, they are often included on committees to be the voice of their people (Stanley, 2006). Similarly, due to the underrepresentation of minoritized faculty in higher education, these minoritized faculty often become a beacon of light for students with similar experiences who are seeking mentorship or guidance (Stanley, 2006).

Minoritized faculty consistently find themselves feeling undervalued and overworked. These experiences impact the quality of life of faculty members. While, it is reasonable to think

that any faculty member could find him or herself feeling this way, time and time again research has highlighted the experiences of minoritized faculty.

### **Christian Faculty Identity**

While there is some research available about Christian faculty identity, there is a significant void in the literature. Sites, Garzon, Milacci, and Boothm (2009) interviewed Christian faculty members at an evangelical Christian liberal arts university and consistently found that the faculty who were interviewed described their faith as an integral, guiding, and defining force in their life. Lindholm (2014) found that a majority of Christian faculty shared their inability to segment their faith from who they are as individuals and as instructors. In their research of Christian faculty in secular institutions, Craft, Foubert, and Lane (2011) found that a significant number of Christian faculty consider their faculty work as “a religious calling” to integrate their religion with their work” (pp. 203-233). In one of the most significant studies of faculty religious connections, Lindholm (2014) found that among all faculty, 31% have a high level of religious commitment. However, there were significantly higher numbers when the research was broken down by denominations. Baptists, Mormons, Church of Christ, Seventh-Day Adventists, and “other” Christians had nearly 70% or higher of their group score as having a high level of religious commitment.

To define religious commitment, Lindholm (2014) used a survey that asked participants to rate to what degree their spiritual/religious beliefs helped them develop their identity; provided them with strength, support and guidance; gave meaning and purpose to their life; rated as one of the most important things in their life; helped define the goals they set for themselves; and underlaid their entire approach to life. She also asked whether they found religion to be personally helpful and whether they gained spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power.

Lindholm (2014) found that 31% of university and four-year college faculty registered as high scorers on the religious commitment measures used. When breaking down the findings, Lindholm discovered that African American and Hispanic faculty were more likely to register high on the religious commitment measure than were colleagues of other races. Sexual minority faculty of any race make up a relatively small number of the overall faculty. In the study by Lindholm, she found sexual minorities to be the least likely to register high on the religious commitment measure. Given these two factors, the number of sexual minority Christians is estimated to be a small number.

Lindholm (2014) stated that in reference to higher education faculty of any faith, “there has been increased interest in issues of meaning, purpose and spirituality. However, there has been very little empirical research on how faculty view spirituality or how they experience its expression in their professional lives” (p. 9). When studying faculty at a Christian liberal arts university, Sites et al. (2009) found that faculty strongly believed in the inseparability of faith from practice. These faculty consistently discussed aspects of integrating their identity and calling as a Christian into their relationship, pedagogy, and practice. Likewise, the research by Lindholm (2014) suggested that the vast majority of faculty feel that their spiritual life and professional life are integrated.

Craft et al. (2011) explored the religious and professional identities of Christian faculty at public institutions. They found that Christian faculty seek ways to integrate their faith with their teaching and research similar to the faculty at Christian institutions. One difference described by the public institution faculty is that many felt the need to covertly integrate their “religious calling,” although the faculty at Christian institutions were free to overtly integrate their faith and looked unfavorably at the faculty who did not (p. 99). Lindholm (2014) also reported that the

religious faculty members in her study often felt the need to hide their Christian identity in the workplace. As one person in her study described:

My relationship with God is such a big part of who I am. It is central to who I am. But I feel I must close that off and only show part of myself to the people I work with professionally. It makes it difficult to feel whole while at work. (p. 129)

Another faculty member revealed:

The primary tension I experience between my spiritual and religious life relates to colleagues (especially in the biology field) who are hostile to or make fun of religion, making me feel that, as a practicing Christian, I'm some kind of minority group who has to keep her mouth shut at times to avoid conflict or ridicule. Students are more comfortable with such practices and likely to discuss them. (p. 137)

Though sparse, the literature featuring the lived experiences of Christian faculty paints a picture of individuals who are often considered to be “privileged” in the United States, but many find themselves criticized, belittled, and often denied promotion because of their Christian beliefs (Bartlett, 2007; Craft et al., 2011; Lindholm, 2014). David A. French, director of the Center for Academic Freedom at the Alliance Defense Fund, stated that reports of discrimination from evangelical Christian faculty are common, but like male victims of domestic violence, victims are often unwilling to pursue legal action. French went on to note that there is a lack of support for Christian professors, particularly on the campuses of large public institutions (Bartlett, 2007).

Despite the research presented above, many in the United States might question the validity of classifying Christians as having a minoritized identity or experiencing discrimination. Indeed, multiple authors have identified the Christian privilege that exists on college campuses of today, both secular and non-secular (Clark et al., 2002; Mutakabbir & Nurridin, 2016;

Schlosser, 2003). However, most recently Herrera (2018), found statistically significant results that those who identify as evangelical Christians are more likely to perceive discrimination against Christians than are other Christians. The word perceived is most certainly the key phrase in making this identification. Christians who perceive themselves to be discriminated against because of their religious beliefs typically experience minority stress because of this perception (Parent et al., 2018). As stated earlier, a minoritized identity is defined as being in a group where they are not part of the majority (Harper, 2012.). Therefore, if Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, are finding themselves in academic environments where most of their colleagues do not subscribe to the same religious beliefs, or at least not to the same theological beliefs, it is reasonable that they would perceive themselves as having a minoritized identity and that they might experience minority stress.

Throughout the discussion of the marginalization experienced by Christian faculty, it is important to nuance this experience through the lenses of Christian privilege and perceived discrimination. Christian privilege can best be defined as the overarching normalization of Christian viewpoints, customs, and practices (Brumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012). In the United States, it can be witnessed through the experience of local, state, and federal breaks occurring in conjunction with holidays linked to the Christian faith and the singing of Christian songs at concerts hosted by public institutions. Given the resounding Christian privilege that exists in the United States, it may seem inaccurate to talk about the marginalization of Christians. However, research exists that legitimizes this claim (Craft et al, 2011; Lindholm, 2014). While not fully understood, research done in an effort to explain this circumstance often looks not only at the religious beliefs of the faculty member but also at the political beliefs, showing a high correlation for faculty who feel they are experiencing negativity due to their religious beliefs to also hold a

conservative political view (Bartlett, 2007). Parent et al. (2018) found that the perception of feeling marginalized on the part of Christians led to feelings of minority stress. Therefore, whether Christians are being marginalized or not, if they perceive that their religious beliefs are under attack, even due more to public situations than personal experiences, they are likely to experience symptoms of stress.

### **Sexual Minority Faculty Identity**

Until the 1970s, sexual minority faculty overall did not have the luxury of being open about their sexual identity within their work environment without the fear of being fired (Dilley, 2002; Dolan, 1998). Dolan (1998) described the climate for sexual minority faculty as tenuous, at best. At that time, faculty were consistently faced with the dilemma of whether to come out to colleagues and/or students or not. Dolan (1998) described a scene in which a new faculty member walked into his office only to find it in disarray with a note on his desk that read, “Queers eat shit” (p. 44).

Very few studies exist that have explored sexual minority faculty identity (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Renn, 2010; Vaccaro, 2012). Those studies that do explore this identity predominantly focus on the ability and safety of the sexual minority individual to be open about their sexual identity on campus rather than exploring the lived experiences, as a whole, of being a sexual minority faculty member. Vaccaro (2012) found that sexual minority faculty still experienced homophobic attitudes and comments from students and colleagues. The predominant theme in her study was that within the college setting, the ability to feel secure that they could be open about their sexual minority identity varied greatly by department across any given college campus. Bilimoria and Stewart (2009) found in their research of sexual minority Science and Engineering faculty that sexual identity was invisible, given the lack of necessity

within these fields to be concerned with personal lives. However, direct and indirect microaggressions still surfaced among faculty and students. Similarly, Orlov (2011) found that coming out in the classroom came with penalties for sexual minority faculty in both their professional and personal lives. Institutionalized heterosexism played a large role in the inability of sexual minority faculty to be open about their sexual identity. As Allen (1995) wrote:

Lesbians, bisexuals and gay men are subject to being told by others to hide their sexual orientation or at least “not flaunt it,” implying that only gay people have a sexual orientation, that a non-heterosexual orientation is about sexuality only, and that only a gay sexual orientation can be flaunted. (p. 138)

Even less prevalent in the literature is the study of pedagogy when it comes to sexual minority faculty. Skelton (2000) found that many sexual minority faculty felt pressure to be “performers” or “entertainers” (p. 198). A significant number of those interviewed utilized sexual identity in their teaching either allowing the subject to spontaneously emerge or by inserting specific units of study focusing in diverse sexual identities. Coming from a different angle, Scudera (2013) discussed his challenges in the classroom in terms of allowing freedom of speech when it comes to the discussion of culturally flammable issues. He stated that he created an environment of open expression about homosexuality but questioned whether he would do the same for anti-Semitic opinions or racial comments. Scudera also reflected on how, without hesitation, he made it clear that racism and anti-Semitism are wrong but stopped short at pronouncing a negative viewpoint on homosexuality as wrong.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Intersectionality is a commonly-used theoretical framework within the study of sexual minority Christian identity (Sherry, Wilde, & Quick, 2010). Therefore, I used intersectionality

as the framework for guiding my research. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) made the following statement: “The politics of research on the intersection of social identities based on race, gender, class and sexuality can at times resemble a score-keeping contest between battle weary warriors” (p. 327). As identified in previous sections, each of the identities embodied by the participants in this study carry with them at the very least a perceived sense of minoritization. The combination of these identities (Christian and sexual minority) has long been a topic of interest to researchers. However, adding the identity of faculty member and the experiences innate to that position and identity adds additional complexity and intrigue to this exploration

Intersectionality emerged from a feminist perspective that challenged the idea that the experience of a woman of color could be adequately explained through the lens of a white woman (Crenshaw, 1991; Shields, 2008). Key to the work of Crenshaw is the foundation that individual identities or multiple identities held independently or viewed while being layered onto each other cannot sufficiently describe the experience of an individual (Collins, 1990). By virtue of their educational status and the influence faculty have on all areas of their institution, faculty are often considered to be privileged. However, when the identity of being a faculty member is intersected with that of a minority social identity, the experience of privilege and majority becomes distorted as it is integrated with the minority social identity (Pifer, 2011). Pifer (2011) suggested that others may not be fully able to understand the faculty experience and how it relates to the institutional outcomes if they fail to consider the intersectional identities that shape faculty experiences and perceptions within the institutional contexts. Hancock (2007) called intersectional work as “incorporating previously ignored and excluded populations into preexisting frameworks to broaden our knowledge base” (p. 248).



Yip (2005) described intersectionality as an investigative model that explores the relations between usual and contrary spaces, such as the dissonance between religious and sexual minority identities. Intersectionality also avoids the perils of identifying sexual minority Christians as merely experiencing cognitive dissonance. Sexual minority Christians typically experience a clash between their learned theological beliefs and their innate sexual orientation. Unlike a conflict between opposing rivals where one emerges as the victor, the dissonance between their sexual minority identity and their Christian identity allows for a third alternative where they reconcile the two identities through the work and re-work the context of what it means to be simultaneously sexual minority and Christian (O'Brien 2004, 2005, 2014; Wilcox, 2006).

As illustrated in the findings of Bartlett (2007), Lindholm (2014), and Craft et al. (2011), Christian faculty members more and more perceive themselves as a minority rather than the privileged majority. Those findings along with those of Parent et al. (2018) validates the idea that many Christians do perceive themselves as minorities. Furthermore, those Christians who perceive themselves as minorities who experience marginalization might then experience symptoms of minority stress because of this perception. Therefore, it would be expected that a sexual minority Christian faculty member would experience the world through an intersectionality identity (Crenshaw, 1991).

The theory of intersectionality helps to provide a context in which to examine how sexual minority Christian faculty may experience their work environment. To aid in developing this study, it was important to explore the concept of intersectional invisibility. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) developed the model of intersectional invisibility. As described by Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, intersectional invisibility is experienced as being a marginalized minority

within a minority group. Intersectionality invisibility is described as having both positive and negative experiences. Therefore, sexual minority Christian faculty may have the ability to hide both their Christian and their sexual identity in the classroom or among their colleagues if they so choose. Hiding either identity can have positive and negative effects, but the ability and option to hide, a privilege not afforded to faculty of color, creates a unique identity intersection. These advantages are most frequently gained by members who do not fit the stereotypical prototype of a minoritized identity. For example, a feminine lesbian would have a greater opportunity to hide her identity as a lesbian than a gay man with feminine features and mannerisms.

In this study, participants hold both the identity of being a sexual minority and the identity of being Christian. This intersectionality combined with the privileged identity of being a faculty member provides opportunities for participants to experience advantages and disadvantages because of their multiple, intersecting identities.

### **Summary**

The lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty remain unknown and unresearched. Despite this lack of research, these people exist on college campuses today and, like any other identity group of faculty members, they wield a wide array of power and influence over the policies and practices of the institution, as well as over the learning and development of their students. Both Christians and sexual minorities experience significantly different worlds than existed at the dawn of American higher education or even that existed one or two decades ago. These changes have resulted in the presence of faculty who experience their work environment from the perspective of a sexual minority who, while not privileged, have certainly achieved acceptance at many institutions and gained significant legal rights and protections yet

who also experiences a privileged yet possibly marginalized identity as a Christian. This study will help propel sexual minority Christian faculty out of the unknown and into an understanding of what it means to be a sexual minority Christian faculty member and how the reconciliation of their identities intertwine and influence their faculty work.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty at four-year Midwestern universities and to gain insight into how those experiences influence their faculty work. Like any other faculty member, these individuals provide instruction to students both in and outside of the classroom through pedagogy and personal engagement. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How does the identity of sexual minority Christian faculty influence their pedagogy, institutional and departmental identity, student engagement, and other areas of faculty work?
2. What is the lived experience of sexual minority Christian faculty working at Midwestern four-year public universities of higher education?

A qualitative design was the most appropriate design to use for this research given my desire to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. Creswell (2007) identified that qualitative research should be used as a method when exploration is needed and to give voice to marginalized groups. Within the field of qualitative research, phenomenology has been identified as an appropriate methodology to use when the purpose of the study is to understand the essence of an experience (Creswell; 2007; Husserl, 1975; Moustakas, 1994). Bryman (1988) described phenomenology as having two purposes: 1) examining the social reality of the individuals being studied, and 2) understanding the lived experiences of their own reality. Moustakas suggested that a qualitative study produces results that inspire additional research and contemplation on a subject. The lived experience of sexual minority Christian faculty is a significantly under-researched topic, yet it is a worthy topic of

study given the influence wielded by faculty members who serve as institutional decision-makers as well as mentors, advisors and educators of students. Because of my desire to understand the essence of their lived experiences, it was appropriate to investigate this topic utilizing a qualitative research design and a phenomenological methodology.

### **Participants**

To identify participants for the study, purposeful snowball sampling was used. Snowball sampling is a technique where participants are recruited by other participants based on their personal knowledge that the individual being recruited meets the basic criteria of the research project (Everitt, 2002). I began the recruitment process by having the Director of the LGBT Center for a public higher education institution forward my “Letter to Participants” (Appendix A) to contacts in other colleges and universities as well as to a listserv of sexual minority faculty within his own institution asking for volunteer participation from faculty who met the criteria for participation in the study. The researcher also contacted churches asking the church leaders to share the participant request letter with their parishioners. I also provided others with the information and asked them to share with anyone they knew who fit the criteria or anyone who might know someone who fit the criteria. As faculty identified themselves as sexual minority Christian faculty and agreed to participate in the study, I asked them if they were aware of anyone else who fit the criteria and who might be willing to participate. Most of the sexual minority Christian faculty who responded to the request for participation email communicated with me via email. Others were approached in person or over the telephone due to a personal relationship or to a coincidental meeting.

I interviewed sexual minority Christian faculty from Midwestern public higher education institutions. All of the faculty interviewed were either currently employed at a higher education

institution or had been employed within the last two years. While Kvale (1994) suggested that researchers “interview so many subjects that you find out what you need to know” (p. 165), Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that phenomenological research should consist of five to 25 participants. I interviewed five faculty members before reaching data saturation. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) defined data saturation as “the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data” (p. 61).

### **Data Collection**

Throughout the development of the literature review, I reviewed and evaluated all the questions asked by other researchers in studies similar to this study. I also strove to develop questions that identified experiences that existed due to the binary created through heteronormativity. Through that process, I developed the interview protocol that was used for this study (see “Interview Questions” in Appendix C).

Data were collected via two in-person interviews. Before the first interview, each participant was provided the Informed Consent (Appendix B) and asked to read and to sign the form, providing they were still willing to participate. To collect the data, I used two audio recording devices, in case of technical malfunction. I held each meeting in a location selected by each participant to ensure each was comfortable with the privacy provided. Given the varying levels of visibility that exist not only within sexual minority faculty but also Christian faculty, it was important to ensure that the participants felt safe in the interview locations.

During the interviews, I took minimal handwritten notes. After the first interview, I transcribed the recording verbatim and sent the transcript to the participant for validation. Once the participant had an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy, we established a second interview time, date, and location.

Similar to the process used for scheduling the first interview, I asked each participant to select a location for the second interview, and a time and date were established. Again, I used two recording devices, and following each interview, I transcribed each recording verbatim with the use of the online software *Trint*. *Trint* is a software that allows the researcher to upload recordings and for a fee, transcribes the recordings, while giving researchers the opportunity to listen to the recording and cross check the accuracy of the transcription delivered by *Trint*. Following the second interview, I mailed the participants a letter, thanking them for their participation. I also included in the letter a \$5 gift card to a local coffee shop.

The participants in this study embraced very personal and often private or hidden identities. Extreme care was taken to ensure that the participants felt safe and secure sharing their lived experiences. To that end, items of special consideration included the following:

1. Some sexual minority individuals may not be out regarding their sexual identity either at work or within their religious affiliation.
2. Sharing lived experiences could portray the departments, colleges, or universities of the faculty member negatively. If the faculty member was not tenured, exposing departmental or college-based discrimination or microaggressions could pose a risk to the employment status of the faculty member.
3. Sharing lived experiences could reflect negatively on the religious affiliation of the participants.

Given these special considerations, it was imperative that the research be conducted in such a way that confidentiality was preserved not only based on individual traits but also based on the institutions with which the individual was affiliated. As such, each participant was asked to select a pseudonym. I used these pseudonyms in all notes and documents. The actual identity

of the participants were stored in a password-secured document on my personal computer and were kept confidential. Given the small number of participants, I decided not to reveal the institutional affiliations of the faculty members in my presentation and discussion of the findings so as to not disclose their identities. Through the analysis of the data, I determined that not revealing the department of the faculty members would greatly diminish the richness of the data and take away a significant amount of contextual information.

### **Data Analysis**

After I transcribed the interviews, I analyzed the data using a method put forth by Moustakas (1994). Below is the method recommended by Moustakas for the analysis of phenomenological data along with a short description of how I completed each step:

1. “Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.” (p. 122). I read and reviewed each sentence to determine if it significantly described an experience related to being a faculty member and either a sexual minority, a Christian, or the intersectionality of the two.
2. “Record all relevant statements” (p. 122). For each participant, I created a copy of the original transcript and titled each with the pseudonym of the participant and the text “Step One.” When I deemed a statement to be significant, I highlighted it in the document using yellow for Christian identity, green for sexual minority identity, and aqua blue for the intersectionality of both. I turned line numbering on for the entire document. The corresponding line number was transcribed onto the beginning of each line to allow me the ability to go back and reference the context of each statement if necessary. Following this numbering, I



- created a separate document for each identity, and I copied and pasted all related statements into the document.
3. “List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement” (p. 122). These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience. After completing the actions listed in steps one and two, I created two separate documents in which I extracted only the unique topics for each identity.
  4. “Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes” (p. 122). After identifying the unique experiences for each participant, I developed a table listing each unique experience and aligning any similar experiences. Following this action, I wrote a more in-depth description that allowed me to visualize the experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty.
  5. “Reflect on the textural description” (p. 122). Through imaginative variation, a description of the structures of the experience was created. I examined the descriptions to explore possible meanings of the data collected. In this process, I envisioned multiple possibilities on ways to approach the phenomenon of the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty. I considered all ideas as potentially valid.
  6. “Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of your experience” (p. 122). Following the completion of imaginative variation, I examined the possible meanings identified both for each individual participant and for the group. To accomplish this, I created an outline in which I identified each emerging theme, key concepts for each theme, and supporting quotes. From

this listing, I completed the analysis to help me reduce and combine emerging themes into more comprehensive themes with more succinct quotes.

### **Research Subjectivity**

Although I am not a full-time faculty member, I have worked as a college administrator and as an adjunct faculty member for a two-year regional community college and for a four-year public institution. I consider myself a Christian, and I identify as a sexual minority. My level of familiarity with this topic and my social network aided me in developing relationships and identifying participants, but the process of participant identification was very difficult. My sexual minority Christian identity also provided a benefit to me during the interviews by affording me the opportunity to easily understand the context of comments made and/or slang used in the interviews. Further, being a Christian and a sexual minority allowed me to be viewed as an insider to the group being interviewed.

It is also important to note that religiously, I subscribe to most of the beliefs of a conservative synodical denomination. However, within the last few years, I have relinquished membership and the rights associated with membership due to conflicting viewpoints with the church leadership related to my relationship with my partner and the interpretations held by the church of the seventh commandment: “You Shall Not Commit Adultery.” This conflict was brought to light after holding lifetime membership on a national level and after 13 years of membership in the local congregation. Despite the membership withdrawal, my partner, our two sons, and I continued to regularly attend the church and to participate in its activities until recently when we decided to change churches due in part to situations having nothing to do with our sexual identity.

Given my personal history, it was important that I took numerous steps to ensure that my personal biases did not inappropriately influence the design or analysis of this research project. Finlay (1998) discussed the need to beware of assuming a shared experience. So, it was imperative that I continuously questioned my own analyses. This practice involved consist review of recent literature to see if there was comparable research.

### **Trustworthiness**

To increase trustworthiness, I worked closely with my major professor who served as a peer debriefer for me. We had several debriefing meetings, and I shared sample transcripts and analyses with her to ensure that the themes that I identified were authentic and truly emerged from the data. In addition, I engaged in member checking to ensure that my interpretations of the comments made by the participants and their stories were accurate. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined member checking as a process whereby the researcher shares the data and analysis with the subjects who were interviewed. This strategy was especially effective given that the subjects are all familiar with and most likely participate in research projects themselves. During my work on Chapter 4, I sent several themes to the participants to ensure that I was accurately interpreting their experiences. After completing Chapter 4, I sent the entire chapter to the participants for review.

Given the potential for bias, it was also important for me to establish an audit trail. Creswell and Miller (2000) described an audit trail as that which is established by maintaining and documenting the inquiry process through journaling and writing memos. My audit trail consisted of my notes, my rationale for interpretations, the exact procedures I used for analyses, as well as the specific information gained from the member checking process.

## **Limitations**

There are several notable limitations to this study. First, the participants represent a relatively small Midwestern geographic area and a limited number of educational institutions. The participants, though not a requirement of the study, are all over 58 years old, a fact that in and of itself adds a unique yet possibly limited perspective. Replicating this study at institutions of different sizes and different geographic areas could possibly yield different results. Further, none of the participants in this study came from the hard sciences. As indicated by Lindholm (2014), there appears to be a stronger resistance and higher number of microaggressions toward Christians in departments focused on the hard sciences. Therefore, a study focused on sexual minority Christian faculty in the hard sciences could yield different data.

## **Summary**

Given the topic of this research – to understand the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty – it seemed best to use a qualitative, phenomenological design for pursuing the answers to my research questions. Despite their lack of numbers, this group, like any other faculty group, plays an important role in the operations of the university and in the lives of their students, whether the students be sexual minority Christians or members of another group. In many ways, this study will provide the first glimpse into the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty and will perhaps be the launching pad for further research.

## **Chapter 4 - Results**

In Chapter Four, I begin by presenting information that will help describe the participants in this study. I will first introduce all the participants, providing information not only about their professional careers but also about their religious identity and sexual identity journey. This information will help provide context to the research results as they relate to the lived experiences of the participants. Following the participant overview, I will identify themes, provide discussion on the meanings that can be extracted from each theme, and share significant quotes from the participants to support the discussion.

### **Overview of Participants**

My study included five participants. Each of these participants has or recently had a professional career as a faculty member in a public institution of higher education. As with other positions in higher education, each participant had varying levels of administrative or research responsibilities, but for all, teaching was a significant part of their work experiences. The institution of each faculty members is located in the Midwest. To preserve confidentiality, while at the same time providing rich relevant data, the institutions will not be named outright, nor will a pseudonym be provided in their place. Institutions will only be referred to as his/her institution. In many studies it is common practice to create a pseudonym for institutions. I have chosen not to follow this practice because I believe that not identifying the institution in any way will allow me to provide more rich information and analysis, while still maintaining confidentiality for the participants. Faculty departments will be identified by academic area unless this practice would jeopardize the confidentiality of the participant.

The participants included four women and one man. Each participant identified as Christian and either lesbian or gay. All participants were gender-conforming. Three of the

participants were tenured faculty while the other two were not in a tenure-track position. None of the participants worked in the same department. The age of the participants ranged from 58 to 70 years old. More details about each participant are in the following section. The participants were not asked to identify their race, but all appeared to be Caucasian.

## **Participants**

### **“Willie”**

Willie was the first participant to respond to the request for participation correspondence. Initially, Willie indicated concern that he might not be “Christian enough” to participate in the research project. After discussing the criteria for participation in the study and the fact that neither a given level of religiosity nor church attendance or affiliation was necessary to qualify as a Christian, he gladly agreed to participate.

Willie considers himself a journalist and has since his youth. His fascination with journalism was heightened with the receipt of a toy printing press from his parents for Christmas when he was in seventh grade. For the next four years Willie published a local newspaper and had a readership of more than 100 subscribers. In his sophomore year of high school, the local radio station offered Willie a job as a copywriter, and from there, he advanced into on-air broadcasting and other duties.

Willie remained in the radio business through his college career. After college, he continued in the field of radio and broadcasting, eventually purchasing and operating his own radio station. After eight years of working, Willie decided to return to the university and obtain a master’s degree. During this time, Willie had the opportunity to teach classes, and in doing so, fell in love with teaching. Working in broadcasting through his entire education, Willie, went on

to get a Ph.D., and after working at another university, he accepted a position with his current department and university.

Raised in a small-town country United Methodist Church, Willie regularly attended church with his mother and siblings but dropped away from the church after beginning college. Later on, he was attracted to church because of a dynamic minister in the local community. After returning to college and beginning his career as a faculty member, Willie did not seek out another congregation. Despite not seeking out a local church home, Willie is adamant that he is in no way atheist or agnostic. If asked, Willie still maintains his United Methodist upbringing.

Willie identifies as a gay man and describes himself as being very open about his sexual identity within his department and institution. Despite the openness of Willie today, as with many sexual minorities, Willie experienced an incongruence in his life based on his Christian upbringing, his sexual orientation, and the cultural environment at the time and in his community. This incongruence negatively impacted his life, but he eventually was able to reconcile these two identities. Willie described the change he experienced when he decided to be more open about his sexual identity:

Well you can go through life living in a closet denying who you are and running from yourself, and Diane, I had a day of reckoning where I about lost it all. I went crazy and you know I can't begin to tell you how happy I am as a person now when all of a sudden, I started loving myself great things really happened.

Willie described himself as being open about his sexual minority identity and his Christian identity with his colleagues, but he does not come out in his classroom to students.

**“Francesca”**

I, as the researcher, personally recruited Francesca to participate in this study. As a friend, I knew that Francesca fit the criteria for inclusion in the study and was confident that she would be willing to participate. Francesca grew up in a small town and attended the Catholic church. In fact, Francesca and her family lived right next to the church, so her family did a significant amount of the upkeep at the church and was very involved in the church. Francesca described her childhood as one where she and her family attended every event at the church. Today, Francesca still identifies herself as Catholic; however, she acknowledges that now, and even in her youth, she questioned the biblical stories and saw church as a social environment.

Throughout the undergraduate career of Francesca, she was involved in a same-sex relationship. During that time, Francesca was very closeted about her sexual orientation. A few friends knew, but that was the extent of her openness. At the time, Francesca did not recognize a dissonance between her religious identity and her sexual identity because of the level at which she hid her sexual orientation,

Francesca attended a community college after high school; she completed her associates degree and transferred to a four-year public university. Francesca graduated with a teaching degree in English and spent the next nine years teaching English, Speech, and Journalism, and while coaching basketball for high school girls at a small high schools located close to her home town. During this time, Francesca realized she was a lesbian but also knew that she could not be open about her sexual orientation in her work or community without facing severe repercussions. Francesca began to feel a significant dissonance between her religious identity and her sexual identity. She describes her feelings at that time in the following way: “I knew I was a lesbian, I just like put it in a box and welded it shut.” In time, this secret took a toll on Francesca, bringing



her to a point where she considered suicide. Fortunately, Francesca choose to live, but vowed if she was going to be alive, she was not going to be “in the closet.”

Francesca left teaching and spent a year working a variety of jobs as she contemplated her next move in life. Ultimately, she returned to her four-year university and enrolled in a master’s program in Animal Science. After completing her master’s, Francesca was accepted into the doctoral program in her department. As part of her coursework, Francesca enrolled in a course offered from an interdisciplinary department. Francesca was emotionally impacted by the materials covered in the class and became very interested in the department. The following semester she co-taught the class she had taken, and after completing her doctorate, was hired as a full-time faculty member in that department. Francesca has remained with this department and continues to advance in her role, not only as an instructor, but also in administrative duties.

Because of the dissonance Francesca was feeling between her religious identity and her sexual identity, when Francesca returned to college to pursue her master’s degree, she spent a lot of time evaluating her faith and her beliefs in relation to her sexual identity. She continued to attend church with her family when she was home and occasionally attended a church located in the town where she was attending college. In her journey to reconcile her faith and her sexual identity, Francesca also sought guidance from a local priest. In this conversation, the priest expressed the love of God for Francesca but also was clear that if she was out, she was not welcome to participate in the sacraments or assist with the service. At the time data were collected for this study, Francesca reported that she attends church with her family when she is home but does not have a home church in the city where she lives.

The return to college marked a time of growth and development where Francesca could explore her lesbian identity while maintaining a level of anonymity in her environment.

Francesca is open with her department and institution about her identity as a sexual minority and as a Christian. She has participated on several committees and assisted with groups related to sexual minority individuals on campus, and she and her wife provide a scholarship for a sexual minority student.

### **“Meredith”**

I recruited Meredith based on the suggestion of the local United Congregational Church minister. I originally attempted to contact her via email, but when that did not produce results, I eventually was able to talk to her in person before a church service. During that conversation, she agreed to participate.

Meredith was raised in a Lutheran church which was part of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS). As a child, she also attended an LCMS parochial school from kindergarten through eighth grade. Eventually, Meredith changed churches and attended a church affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America synod. She remained in this church until she divorced her husband to pursue a relationship with a woman. At that point, Meredith spent the next ten years searching for a church home. She eventually found the local United Congregational church and was intrigued by how welcoming the church was to anyone and how they took the concept of accepting the perspectives of others seriously.

Meredith began her college journey with plans of being a math teacher. However, in her last year and a half as an undergraduate, she changed her major and got a degree in psychology. Following that degree, she eventually received her master's in counseling. After working in the field for a while, she eventually decided that she was not a good fit for a job that required her to sit in a room and talk to people about their problems eight hours a day. Seeking a new path, Meredith began searching for a Ph.D. program that did not require her to focus on one specific

subject. At the end of her search, she found an American Studies program. A part of this program included history classes, which, much to the surprise of Meredith, caught her interest. Unlike the history she learned in high school, these history classes focused on societal factors influencing historical events. After completing her Ph.D., she began teaching women's history at the university in the town in which she was living. Over time Meredith earned tenure and was selected as department chair for two three-year terms. She continued in this position until 2016 when she retired from the university to pursue a calling to become a lay minister at her local church.

Meredith grew up feeling different but did not understand why. However, in the era she grew up, the idea of being gay did not exist for Meredith. She married a man and together had two daughters. As stated previously, she began a relationship with a woman at the age of 40. The development of this new relationship helped her to better understand why she felt different. Unlike Willie and Francesca, Meredith never felt a cognitive dissonance between her sexual minority identity and her Christian identity. She explained it by saying, "I never internalized it like God is mad at me. I internalized that the church is stupid."

Throughout her time teaching as a sexual minority Christian faculty member, Meredith believes she was "out" in the sense that her colleagues and others on the campus were aware of her relationship and eventually some students became aware as well, but she never came out to her classes.

### **"Sally"**

A friend of mine recruited Sally. While very willing to participate, Sally initially questioned whether she would have enough to say given her field, but during the interviews realized she had a lot of insight to share. Sally was raised in the United Methodist Church and

continues to attend the same church in which she was raised, although her church attendance was minimal throughout college and the early part of her career. Upon returning home, Sally eventually returned to attending her home church but sometimes will attend a nondenominational church instead. Sally does not ever hide her Christian identity within her department or the university, but she does not talk about it a lot either. Sally very clearly articulated that throughout her life, she has never felt an incongruence between her faith and her identity as a sexual minority. She always felt that she had a personal relationship with God. She highlighted this by saying:

I don't follow any...religious dogma about what it means to be a lesbian and a Christian....I'm not hung up on any of that, and I don't want to debate it with anybody....God and I have no problems with the way it is.

Sally did express concern over the upcoming vote that was to occur in the United Methodist church - a vote that has since happened. Conversations she has had with other parishioners who are unaware of her lesbian identity have provided her with insights. She commented, "That brought back a lot of memories. You know things have changed, but things haven't changed."

Sally completed her bachelor's degree in physical education and then pursued a master's degree in kinesiology at a different Midwestern institution. During this time, she worked as a graduate assistant, did research in the exercise physiology lab and was an assistant basketball coach for the university. After receiving her master's degree, Sally had a significant career in the field of coaching and in the sport of women's handball. For the last 22 years, Sally has worked as an instructor in physical education and kinesiology at a Midwestern public institution.

Sally has identified as a sexual minority since going to college. Given the culture of society at that time, her level of openness varied based on her role and institution. She remarked

that when she joined her current institution, one of the factors that drew her to it was the level of openness the institution had for all types of diversity. At her current institution, Sally described herself as being open about her identity as a sexual minority, but she does not publicize it. If someone were to ask, she would gladly answer any questions, and she has no hesitation talking about her partner. But she does not directly come out in class.

### **“Trisha”**

Trisha volunteered to be a participant in this study after seeing a notice in the United Christian Church online newsletter. In our discussion, she stated that she figured I would have a hard time finding participants, so she felt it was the least she could do to help out a graduate student. As a child, Trisha attended a variety of different Christian churches with a variety of friends and her grandparents. However, at the age of 15, due to events occurring in her life, Trisha decided that if she was living through such turmoil certainly there could not be a God. At the age of 30, life events changed, and Trisha found herself believing in a higher power through involvement in an Al-Anon program. Around the same time, Trisha’s daughter had several life-threatening medical situations occur. In response to those events, Trisha turned to God because she had realized she and her daughter could not rely on a mortal father to be there for them; they needed someone stronger. Trisha has maintained a strong faith since that time. Her faith is lived out through church attendance, personal prayer, and meditation. Trisha has been a member of the Disciples of Christ denomination for the last 20 years but has not joined a local church. Trisha indicated that having a church home is something that she needs in her life and expects to be searching for one in the near future. Trisha has never experienced cognitive dissonance between her Christian identity and her identity as a sexual minority.

Trisha began her academic career by pursuing and completing her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. Following this achievement Trisha, began pursuing her master's degree. She worked in several childcare facilities, as a childcare center director, and also for an early childhood resource and referral agency. Trisha then moved to another state with the intent of completing her Ph.D. in Early Childhood. During that time, she experienced significant personal issues that resulted in a divorce from her husband, which left Trisha to raise her daughter on her own. These challenges eventually caused Trisha to temporarily leave the program. Once Trisha felt her life was back on track, she returned to continue work on her Ph.D. Feeling that God had other plans for her, Trisha again left her program and moved to another state on the west coast. There Trisha completed her Ph.D. and spent seven years teaching early childhood courses for a variety of educational institutions.

Trisha left the west coast for a faculty position at her alma mater. She taught there for ten years and then took a position in an early childhood research institute. When the funding for the institute ran out, Trisha decided that she missed teaching and student interaction, so she pursued open faculty positions in the field of Early Childhood and obtained a tenured position at her current institution.

Trisha considers herself a sexual minority and has been in a relationship with a woman for more than 29 years. Unique to Trisha in this study is the fact that she explicitly described this relationship as being a gift from God. After Trisha's reacceptance of God, recovery from her divorce, and establishment of her life as a single parent working toward her Ph.D., she asked God about plans for a relationship. The response from God was that her next relationship was right there, and it was her best friend. Trisha describes her acceptance of this by saying, "I said, either I had to say I'd been listening to the wrong voice, because I'd been making my decisions

off of this voice I believed was God speaking to me, so I either had to say I'd made those all wrong or I had to say yes to this because it was the same voice." Trisha described herself as being open about both her Christianity and her lesbian identity. She described this openness as having the confidence to reference her wife in any conversation and a willingness to share relevant devotionals with colleagues at appropriate times.

## **Themes**

In this section I will discuss the themes that I identified from the data analysis. Through a utilization of the own words of the participants, the themes will be presented in an effort to lay the groundwork for describing the essence of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member at a Midwestern public institution.

### **Sexual Minority Identity-Based Support and Mentorship**

Most of the faculty in this study shared their experiences of providing support and mentoring to students with regard to their sexual identity in general and in relation to challenges surrounding the coming out process in particular. Willie described it in this way:

My door is closed a lot. I have students come in and talk to me and share problems and things like that. But I've been able to give wonderful advice to many people. Sometimes students will come out to me or they will come in with questions about how they can deal with problems with their folks, things like that.

Like Willie, Francesca acknowledged that probably more than heterosexual faculty, she and other sexual minority faculty members had a significant number of students seeking their advice, but she was happy to serve in that way:

When I was younger, yes [a lot of students came to talk to me about their sexual identity].

You know as I grew older and that gap grows, not as much. When a younger gay male

joined the department, he got all of them. I still get several. You know we all have different personalities. Some are more comfortable with the younger gay faculty member. Some are more comfortable with me. I don't feel put upon.

Meredith described a consistent pattern of getting calls from other departments looking for someone to sit on a dissertation or thesis committee for students in other colleges pursuing research on topics relevant to sexual minorities:

I went through a spell where I would get a call from another department and somebody would be doing a thesis or dissertation on a topic of LGBT people and would I please be the outside person because they felt safe with me. I guess it did have an impact on my service, but it wasn't something I sought out. In fairness, I was always proud of them for this. In fairness to their students they made sure they didn't get a lunatic. They wanted somebody who would be sympathetic. To whatever the student was doing as a valuable topic. I was actually honored to be asked.

For two of the faculty members, service to students and the institution included sitting on the Sexual Minority Resource Center advisory committee. Both faculty members described their service on that committee as being very important, but for Willie, he considered it his final act of coming out in the institution. Overall the mentorship and service work done by faculty because of their sexual minority identity was described as meaningful and rewarding. Francesca, however, had participated in a significant number of panel discussions and seminars (dubbed “Gay 101”) on being a sexual minority. Francesca described the impact of this experience in the following way:

It's like unzipping your soul when you do it and you say, “Here I am,” And, then it's like people rub sandpaper on your soul during those [discussions]. Rough you up and then it's



like “okay.” Then you zip it back up, you know you are wounded, but you close it up and go on like life is fine. But you know your soul just got roughed up with sandpaper, every time you did that. So, I hope doing that, I helped people think, but I know it cost me a lot.

Francesca’s experience illustrates the level to which some sexual minority faculty are willing to put their life on display in hopes of educating members of the majority population and dispelling some of the many myths that surround people with a sexual minority identity. None of the faculty in this study discussed doing any service work or student mentoring in relation to their Christian identity.

### **Pedagogical Authenticity for Student Inclusion**

The participants in this study all viewed the impact of their identity as sexual minority Christian faculty as influencing their pedagogical authenticity. This authenticity comes forth in their willingness to come out as either a Christian or a sexual minority, and those who do not come out still employ the concept of authenticity as their reason not to come out. Pedagogically, the most important thing to the faculty members was to create an environment where students can learn, believe they have a voice, and feel like they belong. In their efforts to create such an environment, nearly all the faculty also made mention of having to put their identities aside for the sake of not ostracizing a student yet wanting to create a teachable moment. Sally recounted one of those moments:

You know I remember one incident where a student said, “If I had a son that was a dancer, I’d shoot him.” Now he was not being serious. I mean that he would not literally shoot him. But he meant it. I came back with “Oh interesting.” Then I came back with, “Do you know who Mikhail Baryshnikov is?” You know, you want to just go, “Are you

kidding?” I’ll never forget this guy. I like this guy and still stay in contact with him.

How do you handle it? With difficulty.

For a sexual minority, the concept that a student would consider “shooting” his son if he was a dancer clearly implies that the student felt all men who are dancers are gay. As a sexual minority, Sally’s fight or flight response was to admonish the student for having such views. If this remark had been about African Americans or Jewish people, Sally’s response most likely would have been different and contain a stronger reprimand. But because she is a sexual minority, rather than rebuke, she chose to hide her true response and attempt to create a learning moment.

Willie also described how as a sexual minority he finds himself tempering the initial feeling he often has in response to the comment made by a student about sexual minorities. While Willie also has this same reaction to comments about other minoritized individuals, one would not expect a faculty member of color to “bite their tongue” at a derogatory racial comment.

Sometimes I have to hold my tongue. There are times when I want to lash out at people. I just want to rip them a new one because of what their attitudes towards gay people are or Hispanics or old people whatever it is. Sometimes I want to lash out at them, but you know what I do which I think is much more effective is just challenge them. And I’ll find ways of challenging their beliefs or I’ll ask them some probing questions or invite other people to ask them questions you know. I have defended kids who were staunchly conservative before. I’ve defended them because I thought it was more important for them to feel that they had a voice in class, but I also did it in a way as to facilitate a

discussion while other people were asking them the obvious questions they needed to be asked.

As a faculty member in the history department, Meredith described how her pedagogical authenticity as a Christian would stealthily come out in the classroom and how she utilized her lecture on the topic of faith of those in the 1700s to provide support to students who might be struggling in their faith:

You get a lot of students in class who come from Christian backgrounds, so I think it's important for them to know that in historical times there were people who struggled and struggled and struggled with what it meant to feel how they did about their faith.

Whatever it was and how that faith should be applied in the world and where they failed and where they succeeded.... So, it felt like, without me ever saying a word or proselytizing.... I never talked about being a Christian. I never, you know, never said I believed in Jesus Christ. I never did that, but what was important to me is that I wanted them to know that I took it seriously. I wanted them to see that in a lot of circumstances, that faith had been a great influence in the creation of great moral zeal to do something and sometimes they really screwed up when they did it. That was also part. I love that part of it.

In expounding on the idea of her authentic identity as a Christian coming out in her classroom pedagogy, Meredith went on to say:

I think being a Christian came out in my teaching. I haven't told many people this. So, I'm teaching history, and remember what I'm teaching is about 17th century religion. It would always.... I could tell it startled them [the students], because I could quote Bible verses from the top of my head, and it would be pertinent to the thing I was teaching.

You know a lot of times people have gone through a phase when they've been afraid to deal with religion as a significant social factor in the 17th century....and it's not proselytizing at all, it is just talking about these historical characters.

Describing a theme that was frequently expressed by the participants, Sally discussed the authenticity she portrays as a Christian in her classroom pedagogy:

I think the only thing is what I think it means to be a Christian. To be a good person. Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you, to treat students like you want them to treat you. I don't feel like I'm a recruiter. I feel like it's a personal private thing that comes out in how I treat people.

Francesca discussed how given the fact that all or most of the courses she teaches are centered around inclusion and diversity, her authenticity comes through sharing her identities with the class: "For me it's like...you can't hide your life in that class [class centered on diversity] that just doesn't work." Francesca also described her identity intersectionality and how it significantly influenced her pedagogical authenticity and her decision to come out as both a Christian and a sexual minority at the same time:

"I'm a Christian and I'm a lesbian" is a lot different than "I'm an atheist and I'm a lesbian." When you're trying to talk to people, especially students, they can hear me a lot better .... When you say you're a lesbian and you're Christian and you really love the teachings of Jesus Christ vs. "I'm a lesbian. I'm an atheist" .... I think that when you say I'm a lesbian and I'm a Christian it intrigues them. And they're trying to figure it out. Whereas yeah you walk in and say, "I'm a lesbian and I'm an atheist." Then it just confirms everything they've ever thought. It's like, "Okay, you fit the mold. Now I know how to treat you, and I don't have to treat you with compassion."

Francesca also described her pedagogical authenticity of coming out by discussing how her need to integrate all aspects of her life and the subject she was teaching made it necessary for her to reveal her sexual identity:

You know, I think it also depends on what you teach; you can't hide your life in that class [class topic covers interacting with diversity] it just doesn't work. But if you are talking about sugar molecules or eggs, that's a different story.

In the same way Francesca discussed her need to come out as both a Christian and a sexual minority because to do otherwise would feel inauthentic and would not align with her pedagogical philosophies. Willie felt the same way and expressed why he does not disclose either his Christian or his sexual minority identity in the classroom:

My students will understand what I think is important, for example, through my lectures. I teach a big lecture course about people, and they will know for example that I consider issues of diversity to be important, that I consider people who are of various walks of life to be important. I don't deny the importance of somebody who is right wing and conservative or someone who is privileged and rich. I don't want to put those types of values on people, because they have a place. They have a voice here, too, that is not my thing. I want people to know me as somebody who is there for them because I am their teacher and that they can walk into my classroom without judgement. They can walk into my classroom without any kind of a stigma about them or who they are. Period! How do I put it into action? To me that is the most important thing. They aren't going to know about my sexual identity unless they ask, at the same time, they are going to know that I care deeply about issues relating to how people identify themselves across all walks of

life. Across all possible identifications, (if) they identify themselves as a black female, I care about it. If they identify themselves as a transgender male, I care about it.

The identities of participants as sexual minority Christian faculty greatly influence their pedagogy, and how they integrate or mitigate their identities into the classroom adds authenticity to their teaching. These are not the only identities with that influence. Willie described how he came to his decision not to come out with regard to other social identities, based on an experience he had related to other identity disclosures:

I came into the classroom and I pontificated that I am a Democrat, I am a liberal. And you know what happened, because I identified myself that way? The entire semester people thought my information was clouded because of the fact they know how I vote. And the lesson that I learned from that is that it is probably better for me to find other ways of bringing this stuff in front of people, of bringing my own worldview of course content in front of people than it is for me to get up and be an open advocate.... Would there be people who would be affected by me being out and motivated to come out of the closet themselves? Is it something that I should be doing? To me I think the answer is, "What promotes the more meaningful discussion? Do I want a classroom that is fiery that I'm defending my viewpoints all the time, or do I want to have a subtle way of introducing people to the material and making them think in a non-threatening manner?" And I think the second way is a better way of doing it.

When discussing both her Christian and sexual minority lesbian identity, Trisha considered her professional identity as trumping all. While Trisha noted her comfort with strategically coming out as both a Christian and sexual minority, she felt her pedagogy as it

relates to authentically sharing herself with the class is much more influenced by her professional identity. She discussed this by saying:

I have chosen to organize the course [which includes the topic of gender identity] around the school since it is early childhood and those domains because those are the settings, I know best and that is what you get to do as a graduate professor, right? You get to organize the courses in ways that make the most sense in your line of research. I don't do research in sexual identity or gay and lesbian parents or anything like that. That is not what I'm in.... For me it [being a lesbian Christian] hasn't.... And, my first identity is as an early childhood classroom teacher, and so all my research is around children's development in those classrooms, teachers' development in those classrooms, how policy at a center or program or community level impacts what happens in those - and never in a way to pull out one particular group over others. Just children, families and teachers in general....

The focus Trisha had on her identity as an Early Childhood educator reflects the identity held by many of the participants as they determine the best way to authentically connect with their students.

### **Ownership of Faith Versus the Landlord Effect**

For many of the participants, their Christian identity is centered around having a personal relationship with God. This relationship and their faith have developed through a significant amount of reading, research, prayer and self-reflection. The efforts that the participants put forth to develop their Christian identity have left them with a strong sense of ownership in their Christianity. Therefore, they are quick to reject the authority of any church whose actions resemble that of a landlord, someone with a list of those things that keep us in good standing

with God. Because of this strong sense of ownership and their significant investment in their faith, the participants rely heavily on their direct communication with God to guide their thoughts and actions. For many, their Christian identity is a salient part of themselves; it has an inseparable influence on how they teach and live their lives. One of the most vocal participants regarding the influence God has on her life was Trisha. The daily life of Trisha includes 45 minutes to an hour of prayer and meditation every day. This prayer time is spent talking and listening to God, so that she can navigate her life based on what God has in store for her. In illustration of this discussion pattern, she reflected on her involvement with the sexual minority community:

So, I've never sought out to be part of that world [sexual minority], and I don't know yet if I want to do that here or not. I haven't opened the door, but I haven't shut it, to become part of some support network, but being a part of it, I don't know. I'm waiting for.... I haven't had the conversation with God yet to see if I should walk through that or not.

Further illustration of the convictions held by Trisha, and the ownership she has in her relationship with God can be found in her description of how the relationship between she and her wife began:

I didn't enter into a relationship with a woman until I was in my 30s. And only did so because God said this is my gift to you.... And in that moment, either I had to say I'd been listening to the wrong voice, because I'd been making my decisions off of this voice, I believed was God speaking to me.... So, I either had to say I'd made those decisions all wrong, or I had to say "yes" to this request because it was the same voice.

Sally displayed her ownership in the description of her relationship with God as being something that was personal between God and her. Because of this ownership, Sally never felt



the need to reconcile her sexual identity with her Christian identity. In the interview with Sally, she was very clear about what that relationship included and did not include by saying:

I'm coming from a place of how it's personal to me. I don't follow in my head any religious dogma about what it means to be a lesbian and a Christian. In other words, in my head, I mean I could read the Bible and there's lots of different places that say this or that. I don't. I'm not hung up on any of that, and I don't want to debate it with anybody. It's not necessary for me. You think what you think. I think what I think. I know I have a relationship with God. And it's the one I want to know. God and I have no problems with the way it is.

Echoing Sally, Meredith displayed her ownership through the absence of dissonance between her sexual identity and her Christian identity:

I never had that thing that some people talk about, thinking that God was mad at me. That never was part of the equation. I think I was old enough; I was in my 40s. A lot of the work I did for a living was about the obstacles that had been put in place, historically, for all kinds of people - particularly women. So, I never internalized it like "God is mad at me." I internalized that the church is stupid.

The experiences discussed by the participants highlight the ownership they possess in their Christian faith and their relationship with God. This ownership allows them to reject the rules created by a church wishing to act like a landlord. Rather, they view God as the contractor foreman and ultimate authority. Meredith stated "I internalized that the church is stupid" seems to convey a sense of detachment from or contempt for organized religion. It reflects the depth to which Meredith reflected and studied to develop her spiritual and religious beliefs and the significant amount of time she spent searching for the right church. Raised in the LCMS church,

The first experience Meredith had with religious doctrine was based on a literal interpretation of the Bible and the writings of Martin Luther. In that religious community, the experience of Meredith, especially as a woman, was her inability to have any viewpoint that deviated from the synodical publications of the church. Also, within that religious community, women had very limited roles; women were not and still are not allowed to be ministers and are not allowed to hold a position within the church leadership that has supervisory authority over the minister. At the time that Meredith was affiliated with the LCMS church, women were also not allowed to be voting members. By comparison, the current church body that Meredith is involved with encourages her to have ownership in her faith. Members are encouraged to discuss and debate theological differences and are allowed to ultimately agree to disagree. When questioned about the authority held by the church, Meredith stated, “If the church is acting in love, it has a lot of authority.”

### **Seeking the Support and Connection Offered by a Faith Community**

In this study, the participants longed for and sought out faith communities to provide spiritual support and connection. They were also very clear about what they expected from their faith community and why they had abandoned other churches. Most of the participants discussed the important role that belonging to a faith community played in their life. However, the experiences of the participants were both positive and negative depending on the church. Regardless of the type of experience, all the participants thought their faith communities made a difference in their life. It is also important to note that while the participants sought out faith communities, they were not as intent on the dogma or religious creeds of the church as they were on experiencing acceptance and community. Meredith discussed this idea:

I honestly think that most of those 10 years I just felt like I couldn't be the faith I had been all my life before. I couldn't figure out where to turn because of my own preferences about church services. For example, I don't like services that are like Rotary Club meetings. I want a ritual surrounding the service. However, it wasn't clear to me that any of those places were places that would be much of an improvement over where I had been. And what I mean by that is that I needed to go someplace that sort of I guess that my - this is going to sound awful - criteria for what a church service should be like.... And [that] was welcoming to me and my family.... And that we wouldn't be weird....

Meredith also described both supportive and unsupportive identity experiences with churches:

When I left my other church, it wasn't that anybody wasn't nice to me. It's just that I knew I had an asterisk after my name. And so, they were always going to be awkward because I was suddenly a different person to them. I thought, "I don't have time for this. I don't need it. This isn't how I want to feel in a church, like I'm sneaking around trying to not cause offense."

In contrast, Meredith shared the support that she feels from her current church:

My church has been a tremendous source of support. Belonging to that church changed everything; it released me from everything. You know there were 10 years where I didn't much go to church and I hated it. I felt really uncomfortable with it. The joke my daughters and I have is that we probably went to every Christmas Eve service at every other church in town because I would always drag them, and they always wanted to go to church on Christmas Eve and so we would go. It was when I discovered the church that I

belong to know that I could go, [breathed a sigh] “OK that feels better.” But the last 15 years.... That church, I mean it changed everything for me.

Trisha also had similar experiences with varying levels of identity support in different churches. While Trisha did not share her “criteria” for a church like Meredith, she also was clear that feeling accepted was a much higher criteria than the dogma of the church:

I haven’t attended church on any regular basis in my time here but probably will. I can’t really make it without that anymore, without that spiritual home.... It is just a very different environment when a church has made an attempt [to be open and affirming]. We attended the same church for 15 years in the city we lived in, and there were still people who thought we were two little old ladies living together to save money because they didn’t want to take it into their worldview. It just didn’t fit, we looked too much like them; we didn’t look butch, you know.

Trisha went on to share examples of the difference she experienced from her church congregation versus from other groups of people with which she was affiliated.

After my fall, several colleagues asked if there was anything I needed. I remarked to several that help with meals would be nice, as it was hard for me to do much of anything. And when my wife came, she spent most of her time cleaning the house, doing laundry and picking up after me. Despite this comment, no one brought food. By comparison, one weekend when we went back to our other home, two members of our church family drove an hour during rush hour in a large city to bring us dinner.

Sally, a United Methodist, shared concern over the vote scheduled by the Church in February of 2019 on the topic of accepting sexual minority individuals. As mentioned earlier, Sally returned to attending her home church after being gone from the community for more than

20 years. Upon her return, she was accepted with open arms, but recently has experienced personal conflict over the vote. Like many sexual minority Christians, Sally had chosen not to dwell on the differences between her sexual identity and the “Book of Discipline” of the United Methodist Church, because she felt comfortable and accepted in her home church environment. However, the outcome of the vote could encourage her to change churches to remain in a faith community where she feels welcome:

That was interesting because there's parts of me that says it makes no difference to me whatsoever because how I feel about my relationship with God has nothing to do with anything that the Methodists do. And it hasn't changed my whole life really that way. But another part of me.... That brought back a lot of memories. You know things have changed but things haven't changed.

The words of Sally that have been shared above paint a very clear picture of the important role that an open and affirming faith community plays in developing and supporting their Christian identity. Conversely, their words also share the impact of faith communities that are not open and affirming. While it is important to note that none of the participants talked about feeling open hostility from their non-affirming faith community, they clearly articulated the feeling of otherness or feeling less than.

Trisha described needing a faith community by saying, “I just can’t make it without a spiritual home.” Faith communities provided most of the participants with a grounded spirit of connection and support for their everyday lives. Like other individuals, positive relationships and interactions outside of work help to support the overall well-being of the person and aids their ability to be successful in all aspects of their life. Similarly, when a person feels a gap in

their life due to not having a faith community, or if they feel unwelcome or ostracized in their faith community, they often find that experience carrying over into their work life.

### **Institutional and Departmental Support**

Turning to the work environment, the faculty in this study identified various forms of support they received based on their identity as a sexual minority Christian, and they also described areas where they did not feel supported. All of the participants described their current departmental colleagues as equally supportive of their Christian and sexual minority identities. Participants in this study also noted an overall acceptance on the institutional level as well, but some had experiences that left them feeling hurt or wounded. Meredith described a consistent pattern of her wife being left off of invitations:

As department head, I had a lot of contact with the office of the President. At that point we were doing a project, and there would be these dinner parties that department heads would get invited to. And I would get there and find that every other department head had their spouse with them, but mine had not been invited. It was like they deliberately [excluded her]. I felt at the time because the person who would make the decision, knew who I was with, and made that decision because we wouldn't want to embarrass the special guests or anything like that. It really got to be really irritating.... I did make a decision that when they did those things, that were actually pretty hurtful, I didn't push it. I just didn't. It's sort of.... I think that I came to the attitude that you're not worth the trouble. You know it only confirms what I've been thinking about all along.

All the faculty discussed being out with their colleagues about both their sexual minority identity and their Christian identity. Descriptions of the atmosphere within their departments

varied from being welcoming, respectful and accepting to being highly supportive. Willie described a level of laid-back acceptance:

Very open.... Now I don't run around advertising, but I mean everybody knows.... I've been through 5 department chairs in 10 years. And all of them, when they come here, we have the conversation.... And I say "Ok, I want you to understand that I'm gay, and I want you to understand that there is someone in my life that teaches for another university. And I want you to understand that this is the only time we will have this talk." Everybody is fine with it of course. All my department colleagues - if I haven't told them outright - they at least know. They are respectful of it. They get it, you know. And my partner is here for Christmas parties. My partner is here for a lot of departmental things that happen, and it just really isn't an issue. Something I learned a long, long time ago.... If you don't treat it like an issue, the others won't either. You know what I mean?

Meredith was the only faculty member whose sexual identity changed during her time at the institution. Despite the change, she described her colleagues as accepting:

I always was open with them. I was in my early 40s when I came out. It involved a divorce. My colleagues knew my husband and to their eternal credit honestly, they didn't even blink. They were startled that I'd split up with my husband and then they found out why and went, "Oh. Ok." They were actually lovely about it.

Meredith also talked about how she didn't feel like she was that open with her colleagues about her Christian identity but found out differently at the time of her retirement:

There's a funny story, I think. This a great question for me because, I don't know that.... In my memory, I'm not all that open about it. I don't hide it. But I'm also not that open about it. And yet in every turn I've had people say to me, "Oh yeah, I'm coming to your

church because I've heard you talk about it.” So, I guess I did. In fact, my colleagues when I retired did me a great honor. One of my gifts from them was the beginnings of a pastoral library. They gave me six beautiful books that a pastor would need. It was really just awesome, so I guess it was enough that they knew it for sure.

On the extreme end of showing support, Francesca described her the climate in her department regarding her Christianity but also reflected the same sentiment when it came to her lesbian identity:

[I'm] 100 percent open about my Christianity. It's interesting. We don't talk about it a lot. I don't think we do, and we don't. We're a big Snapchat department. We have a group Snapchat, and we Snapchat a lot of things. It's like I Snapchat Christmas Eve from church. Because I think it's cool. You know.... The lights are out. The candles are on. Now should I be Snapchatting in church? That's a whole other issue. But that's something that I want to share with people. I think others share their things too, and sometimes they're doing religious things when they Snapchat. I guess it goes kind of like the question: [Are you] gay or lesbian? Whatever my colleagues do, or whatever they're doing in their lives - assuming it's not harming somebody or harming themselves - that is something I want to support them in. And, I want them to support me in what I do. I feel that from my colleagues, and so, you know if it's religion, great. I know I never feel that anybody pushes religion here. I think we both equally support religion and deconstruct religion and understand religion's role in the good things it serves and the not so good things it serves. And I think we have a lot of those discussions. I feel really supported here.



Also, all of the participants named their spouse or partner as being outside of the institution but also being a positive source of support for them as sexual minority Christian faculty member.

### **Attributive Strategic Self-Disclosure**

The participants in my research were all open about their status as a sexual minority. While they are all “fine” with their identity as a sexual minority, there is and probably will always be a subtle or not so subtle feeling of fear when placed in a position to strategically come out. Through experience, they all have learned that the people who come out by saying “I’m a lesbian” or “I’m gay” are often viewed as radicals and usually fail to fit in with the dominant group. Given their unwillingness to be viewed as such and their desire to fit in with their colleagues, combined with the desire to be authentic (i.e., not lie), sexual minority faculty perform attributive strategic self-disclosure by the women saying they have a wife, or by naming their partner as someone with a name that is typically associated with their same gender. This attributive strategic self-disclosure allows the person receiving the information to respond or not respond to the disclosure. In a reverse example, if someone who is a sexual minority makes the statement “I’m gay or a lesbian or bisexual,” there is an expectation that the other person will respond to that statement. This response can be either affirmative, negative or benign. Whatever the response, the other person risks being misinterpreted or accurately interpreted as being homophobic, or at the very least, being perceived as not supportive of their identity as a sexual minority. This situation can be an awkward situation at the very least or could develop into a significant argument. Therefore, by utilizing attributive strategic self-disclosure, sexual minorities develop a situation that is less confrontational yet still allows them to be authentic to their identity as a sexual minority. Utilization of attributive strategic self-disclosure can be a conscious or subconscious act of self-preservation. Every participant in my study described their

outness among colleagues, students, church, and the institution in terms that reflect strategic homonormativity.

Meredith clearly articulated the challenges faced by sexual minorities in regard to coming out. Although coming out is often described in identity development models as a one-time thing, participants in this study articulated how being out was an all-day, everyday decision-making process:

I think it's a decision you make every day. And you make it in every circumstance. Is this a place where I'd feel comfortable saying I have a wife? Is this a place where I would say that my spouse's name was a female? Is this the place.... And when I first came out, that was like the hardest thing. I'd say, "my spouse" and just be vague about it. You know, then you get the awkward question, "What does your husband do?" Oh hell.

Francesca, someone who openly outs herself as a Christian lesbian in classes, describes how her openness in the classroom is different from her everyday life. Francesca also describes her adoption of attributive strategic self-disclosure in her non-work life:

For me it's like.... You can't hide your life in that class [a class focused on diversity and understanding other cultures]. It just doesn't work.... I don't go down the street and say, "Hey, I'm gay." But, I'll say, "I need to go home. You know my wife is waiting" or "Barbara's at home, and I've got to go." I used to not talk about my home life as much. But I don't hesitate now. I just say, "I've got to get going. Barbara's waiting."

Trisha expressed how at times in her life she needed to be more strategic in revealing her sexual minority identity:

When I was on faculty there in 1997-2007, I was very open with graduate students but not with undergrads. Partly because my wife is more private than I am, and we taught some of the same students during those years, and so I didn't want to be telling her story. While Trisha strategically formulated her openness in classes, the openness of her wife caused her to adjust her openness, she also discussed her utilization of attributive strategic self-disclosure at her departmental level in a different light:

I talk about my wife all the time. I tell my story about how we met if it makes sense.... I mean she's a huge part of my life.... We've been together nearly 29 years. She is a huge part of who I am, and I cannot *not* talk about it or share it. And, I figure if they [people in department] have issues with it, that is their problem, I don't worry about it.

Another example of attributive strategic self-disclosure is highlighted by the description from Trisha of the involvement by her wife with the leadership in the department or institution in which Trisha taught:

In 1997, a woman on the interview committee warned me I might want to be less open, because I had mentioned things in the interview. She warned me I might want to be careful around the dean with what I said. I said, "I can't do that, I'm not going to." And so, I didn't. What was really ironic was that my wife ended up becoming even closer to that dean than I was.

Referencing a different institution, Trisha also talked about introducing her wife to colleagues and to university leadership:

I took my wife to meet the provost at a welcome event. I was a brand-new hire here, and I introduced her to everybody there as my wife. Again, she got into a really big

conversation with the dean of the Graduate School because they knew of each other through another venue.

The description by Willie of his openness clearly reflected the attributive strategic self-disclosure. He does not come out in his classroom, but when talking about his level of openness with regard to his sexual minority identity, he said:

I think it means that I am not afraid to invite people into my home. I'm not afraid to share my life with them, I will answer any questions that they have about him [Willie's partner]. He has Parkinson's disease, and many people know him. We've been to conferences together, and people have met him many, many different ways because he is as visible at his university as I am visible at mine. And because so many people know him, it's just.... If it's a big deal, and I'm pretty good at reading people.... If it's a big deal, I would be stunned. But it is because I haven't treated it like it is a big deal. I've treated it like it is one facet of my life; if they don't accept, fine. But overall, it's none of their damn business.

The faculty in this study, are all clearly comfortable with their sexual minority identity. Their use of attributive strategic coming out reflects not only their comfort but also the fact that they are unapologetic about who they are, and they do not feel the need to own other the potential disapproval or lack of understanding that may occur in other people as their problem. Through this stance as a whole, they have found acceptance within their work environment.

The experiences of the sexual minority Christian faculty in this study paint a picture of individuals who are accepted within their department and their institution. Their outness about their identities is nuanced by their dedication to student learning and support. Similar to other minoritized faculty members, they experience cultural taxation, but overall, their view on this

taxation is that it is well worth their efforts given the impact they have on the lives of students. Most of the faculty do not wear their Christian identity on their sleeve, but they experience it influence in their work and in their everyday life.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications**

In this final chapter of this phenomenological study on the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty, there will be a discussion of the findings and their relationship to existing literature. This chapter will also address the implications that the findings have on future research addressing sexual minority Christian faculty. Finally, this chapter will provide recommendations and insight to administrators and colleagues of sexual minority Christian faculty which will aid them in promoting and creating an equitable and inclusive work environment for all faculty.

These findings help to begin answering the research questions posed by this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty working at Midwestern public institutions of higher education?
2. Does the identity of sexual minority Christian faculty influence their pedagogy, institutional and departmental identity, student engagement, and other areas of faculty work?

### **Essence of the Phenomenon**

Based on the findings of this study, the essence of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member at a Midwestern institution is nuanced with experiencing a wide array of institutional acceptance both from inside and outside of their department and college. For most, but not all, being a sexual minority is a more salient identity than their identity as a Christian. But, through attributive strategic self-disclosure, they most often present that identity on campus through mention of their spouses or partners without hesitation in everyday conversation. However, they all acknowledge the necessity – when not in the safe-haven of academia – to continually evaluate their openness and language during conversations with strangers. Most of the participants sought involvement in a Christian congregation, but all of those who did, had

experiences of marginalization and feeling “less than.” While most of these experiences were not overt discriminatory actions or disparagements, they still impacted how the participants viewed the church. Those who had ultimately become involved in an open and affirming congregation felt accepted and relieved. Involvement in open and affirming congregations which had actively made the decision to be open and affirming proved to be significantly more satisfying to the participants than those who had not become involved in such congregations.

Sexual minority Christian faculty face unique classroom challenges. Pedagogically, they put creating a classroom environment that provides students the opportunity to learn as paramount in their teaching. For some, not disclosing any of their identities provided the opportunity to be the most authentic while following their personal pedagogical philosophies. For others, openly sharing all their identities provided this opportunity.

Most of the sexual minority Christian faculty exhibited ownership of their faith; by that, I mean they did not allow the biblical interpretations of other beliefs to influence the salience of their identity as a sexual minority Christian. They held their personal relationship with God in high regard, often seeking to discover what his plans were for their life. As an enhancement of their faith, the sexual minority Christian faculty in this study also sought out faith communities where they felt supported.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

For the participants in this study, their identity as sexual minority Christians influences their work and their life outside of work. As a result, sexual minority Christian faculty seek support within their department and provide support and mentorship not only for students within their academic field but also for students who identify as sexual minorities. These faculty also are often called upon to perform service to the institution because of their status as a sexual

minority. Sexual minority Christian faculty also seek support outside of academia through their interactions in a church community. Regardless of their level of involvement in a church community, sexual minority Christian faculty members have a strong sense of their faith and are active participants in developing their faith and their relationship with God. Sexual minority Christian faculty experienced only a slight intersectionality of their multiple identities; this intersectionality was mostly related to feeling the need to combine the identities to achieve authenticity. Several participants also discussed how they felt their Christianity aided them in how they treated and interacted with students and colleagues.

Sexual minority Christian faculty experience their minoritized status uniquely in comparison to other groups in that their identity as a Christian and as a sexual minority are both considered hidden identities. In spite of their ability to hide their identities, in most circumstances, the participants chose to be open about their identities. While often it is believed that hiding a stigmatized identity will aid in gaining acceptance and belonging (Katz, 1981), the experiences described by the participants more closely represent the findings of Newhouse and Barretto (2014) in which the participants in their study had a stronger sense of belonging if they were open about their hidden identities.

Existing research sheds light on the importance of the findings of this study. For instance, Cameron and Lavine (2006) discussed at length the need to understand what factors are necessary for faculty members to thrive and flourish. The research of Pifer, Baker, and Lunsford (2019) also clearly highlighted the beneficial impact of positive collegial relationships and the role that community plays in fostering academic success for faculty members. Furthermore, Anderson (2009) described authenticity as existing on three tiers: individual authenticity, organizational authenticity, and societal authenticity. Consistent with the writings of Anderson,



this study identified various topics existing within these three tiers that make up the essence of the identity of sexual minority Christian faculty. Individual authenticity is seen through the desire of the faculty members to be authentic in the classroom through their pedagogy and their work with students. Organizational authenticity is seen in the openness of the faculty with regard to their status as a sexual minority and a Christian. Societal authenticity is seen in their desire to seek out support through faith communities. Adding action to work of Anderson, Risku, Harding, and Precey (2012) issued a call for authentic leadership within the field of higher education to cultivate the breadth of identity that exists within their faculty. Answering their call, this study provides abundant illustrations of the impacting elements that influence the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty, giving administrators an outline of relevant topics and experiences that influence the identity, and subsequently the work, of sexual minority Christian faculty working in their department.

### **Sexual Minority Identity-Based Support and Mentorship**

In their work, the faculty were more often called upon to provide mentorship or service based on their sexual minority identity only rather than on their Christian identity or on being both a sexual minority and a Christian. Cultural taxation is a term coined by Padilla (1994) and is defined as

the obligation to show good citizenship toward the institution by serving its needs for ethnic representation on committees, or to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to a culture group, which may bring accolades to the institution, but which is not usually rewarded by the institution on whose behalf the services was performed. (p. 26)

Examples of cultural taxation provided by Padilla (1994) included but are not limited to providing mentorship to students from a similar minority status, serving on committees as the voice for a given minority group, and meeting with groups or doing presentations to help the majority students, faculty, or staff better understand a minority group. In more recent scholarship, Joseph and Hirschfield (2011) found similar examples as the experiences described by Padilla. Sexual minority faculty have also been found to have similar experiences (Joseph & Hirschfield, 2012; Reybold, 2009, 2014). In other research, faculty experiencing cultural taxation frequently discussed being overworked due to their work demands and the demands of serving on extra committees or being the mentor for students with similar minority identities (Martinez, Chang, & Welton, 2017). The idea of cultural taxation, though not clearly identified as such, was clearly articulated in many of the reflections of the participants during this study. Several experienced a significant number of students who were seeking mentorship, above and beyond the typical advising work load of the faculty members. Participants also talked about being asked to serve on various committees because of their status as a sexual minority. While there was some level of remorse over the added work that was applied to them as a result of cultural taxation, a sense of pride was also reflected by most of the participants in the work they have done to help a student get through a difficult situation or to help the institution create a more inclusive environment.

### **Pedagogical Authenticity for Student Inclusion**

Personal disclosure in the classroom is a frequently discussed topic in the educational literature. The desire and decision to disclose personal identities such as being a sexual minority or being a Christian is fraught with complexity. Rasmussen and Mishna (2008) cautioned that personal disclosures should be for the benefit of the student, not the instructor. Identity

disclosure on the part of sexual minority Christian faculty brings with it the risk of alienating some students while empowering other marginalized or majority students (Gregory, 2004). Coming out as a sexual minority can also reinforce heteronormativity and binary categories (Jennings, 2010). Nielsen and Alderson (2014) found that most of their participants stated that they disclosed their sexual minority identity to be authentic.

The decision to come out in the classroom also was highly related to relevance to the topic and the possibility of being seen as pushing an agenda (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014). Sexual minority faculty often find themselves questioning at what point they should allow discussions that may include derogatory comments about sexual minorities in an effort to provide freedom of speech and to provide the students with a self-made learning moment compared to the level they allow this type of discussion on other culturally-based topics such as religion or race (Scudera, 2013).

All of the faculty in this study made the decision to come out as a Christian and/or as a sexual minority after much contemplation. Similar to the prior research listed above, and regardless of their decision, all of the participants sought to be authentic in their actions. While most were out in their classroom as being both Christian and a sexual minority, those who were not made this decision based on experience and their desire to provide students with the best learning environment possible. Unique to this study is the impact that the intersection of being both a sexual minority and a Christian has on the way in which students receive the information being provided by the faculty. An example of this is observation by Francesca that she receives more credibility from students when they view her as a sexual minority Christian than they would if she were a sexual minority atheist. Because of Christian privilege that Francesca receives, she is treated with more respect. This finding is similar to the experiences of minority

faculty in which there are frequent reports of students doubting their credentials (Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998; Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, & Frey, 2009) or students who address minority faculty as though they are a peer rather than the instructor (Martinez, Chang, & Welton, 2017; Perry et al., 2009). Although the majority of the participants in this study experienced a significantly greater influence on their work due to their identity as a sexual minority, similar to the findings of Craft, Foubert, and Lane (2011), the participants saw their faith and identity as a Christian as inseparable from their personal pedagogy.

### **Ownership of Faith Versus the Landlord Effect**

Despite the recognition by sexual minorities that many religions are unwelcoming, the majority of sexual minorities in the United States are religiously affiliated. But this majority exists only by a small number (Murphy, 2015). However, there is a significant difference between the percentage of sexual minorities and heterosexuals who are religiously affiliated (Murphy, 2015). Among those sexual minorities who are religiously affiliated, the percentage who are Christian is also much lower than that of heterosexuals who identify as Christian. Higher education faculty also report being less religious than the overall population in the United States, and sexual minority faculty report being less religious than their heterosexual counterparts (Lindholm, 2014). Despite the reduced number of sexual minority Christians in the United States, the majority of studies on sexual minority Christians portray them as astute and well-versed on the intersection and the conflict that exists between sexual minorities and Christian teachings (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015; Levy & Edmiston, 2014; Yip, 2002).

Though not identified as a theme, nearly all of the participants discussed the Christian identity work they went through in an attempt to reconcile their sexual minority and Christian identity. Given the Christian identity work performed by sexual minority Christians, it is

common for them to view their coming out and even their rejection of traditional Christian dogma and beliefs as doing the work of God (Rodriguez, 2010; Sumerau, Gragun, & Mathers, 2016). Many sexual minority Christians give God the credit for providing them with the strength to come out, and they accept their sexual orientation and view it as a gift from God. Failure to accept this gift is viewed as failing God and not living up to the standards set by God (Sumerau, Gragun, & Mathers, 2016). Trisha reflected this belief in her discussion about how her wife was a gift from God. Most of the participants in this study recounted lived experiences of exploring and building their own personal faith, a faith manifesting itself into a life that is led by God but owned by the individual.

### **Seeking the Difference Offered by a Faith Community**

Belief in a higher power influences forms of giving, membership, and participation in faith communities (Cornwall, 1989; Park & Smith, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997). For many sexual minorities, supportive faith communities play a significant role in helping individuals develop integration between their sexual and Christian identity (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). For some sexual minority Christians, being a part of a faith community is more important than the beliefs of the community due to their desire to maintain their relationship with their home church. Other reasons for sexual minorities to continue involvement in a non-affirming church is their structural belief that all communities are flawed, and therefore, leaving one flawed community for another does not seem like a plausible solution, either (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015).

Despite the willingness of some sexual minorities to stay in a faith community that is not open and affirming (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015), it is certainly more typical for sexual minorities to seek out open and affirming faith communities (Lease, Horne, Noffsinger-Frazier,

2005). Involvement in these communities helps participants reduce internalized homonegativity, and for many, leads to psychological health (Lease, et al., 2005).

### **Institutional and Departmental Support**

The sexual minority Christian faculty in this study reported a strong sense of acceptance and support from their colleagues, departmental administrators, and the overall university. This support was positive both for their sexual minority identity as well as their Christian identity. While being aware of microaggressions and marginalization experienced by others across their campuses, particularly for sexual minorities this the participants in this study resoundingly had few if any negative personal experiences and the majority of the negative experiences occurred more than a decade ago.

Historically, the experience of sexual minorities in the university setting was tenuous at best (Dilley, 2002); however, over the last several decades campus culture as it relates to sexual minority faculty has changed dramatically (Cook & Glass, 2008; Iverson, 2012; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). More inclusive and welcoming work environments have been created for sexual minorities through the adoption of nondiscrimination policies and the legalization of same-sex marriages. Attitudes about same-sex marriage and sexual minorities continue to change and improve. For example, in 2007 only 37% of Americans supported same-sex marriage, but by 2017 62% expressed support (Masci, Brown, Kiley 2017).

As another expression of acceptance, all of the participants in this study had earned tenure or were eligible for promotion. Reinert and Yakaboski (2017) found that departmental culture and interactions were important to sexual minority faculty. In their study, faculty described having strong collegial relationships with people in their department and the university. While some of their participants expressed periodic times of discomfort, in several

cases it was more strongly associated with the fact that there were few sexual minorities in the department. In this study, participants lauded their relationship with college or departmental colleagues. Another commonality that this study has to the work of Reinert and Yakaboski (2017) is the length of time the faculty have been at their institutions. Except for one faculty member, all the faculty had been at their institution for at least seven years and some significantly longer. Further, three of the participants in my study had received degrees from the institution at which they worked. Given the level at which the faculty were engrained in their institutions, it is reasonable to expect that any issues that may exist due to their status as a sexual minority or a Christian would have been resolved some time ago, or the faculty would have moved to another college or university.

In recent years, some Christian faculty have begun to describe their work environment as hostile and challenging (Lindholm, 2014). Due to negative experiences with colleagues and administrators (Lindholm, 2014), Christian faculty feel the need to covertly integrate their religious faith with their role as a faculty member (Craft, Foubert, & Lane, 2011). Faculty engaged in research that explores religious topics are often not viewed as “true” academics and often face challenges obtaining tenure or promotion (Lindholm, 2014). However, as stated above in this study, none of the participants felt hostility or marginalization due to their religious beliefs.

Evaluating the difference between the participants in this study and the growing trend of Christian marginalization presents several possible explanations. Bartlett (2007) highlights that many Christians who are experiencing marginalization due to their faith consider themselves evangelicals. This fact was also highlighted the work of Lindholm (2014) and her research. Adding to this understanding, both Bartlett (2007) and Lindholm (2014) note the connection

between political conservatism and evangelical Christians. Lindholm (2014) found a direct correlation between being a conservative on the far right and being an evangelical Christian.

On the other hand, some authors would question the reality of Christians being marginalized in the United States due to the overwhelming Christian privilege that exists (Dupper, Forrest-Bank, & Lowry-Carussillo, 2015). Lindholm (2014) also found that Christians who worked in the sciences experienced much more conflict with colleagues in regard to their religious beliefs than faculty from other areas of the university. None of the faculty in this study were in a science or math field. Given the religious affiliation and practices of all of the participants in this study, none of them considered themselves to be either evangelical or conservative.

### **Attributive Strategic Self-Disclosure**

The literature about sexual minorities suggested that they spend a significant amount of effort identifying and defining the psychological development that occurs for a sexual minority as they come to terms with their sexual identity (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994). Embedded in many of the developmental models is the act of “coming out” (Marhankova, 2019). Absent from the research is an examination of how the coming out process impacts the day-to-day lives of sexual minorities (Orne, 2011). Therefore, in his research, Orne (2011) developed the perspective of strategic outness. Orne (2011) described strategic outness as having three aspects: 1) strategies, 2) motivational discourses and 3) social relationships.

During the course of the interviews, nearly all of the participants shared the story of how they initially came to accept their sexual minority identity and how they shared that news with those who were most important to them. Meredith discussed how coming out was not a one-time thing, but in fact, it can be an everyday event depending on the course of her day. She also went



on to share how cumbersome it can be in conversations with people who are not a part of her immediate friend or family group. However, a finding unique to this study is that all the participants discussed the fact that they really do not come out any longer saying “I’m gay” or “I’m a lesbian.” Rather, they typically come out through the natural course of conversation simply by referencing their spouse or partner, thereby identifying themselves as a sexual minority. Kitinger (2005) noted that heterosexuals “routinely produce themselves and each other as heterosexual” (p 221) through the practices of referencing culturally understood terms such as husband or wife. Due to heteronormativity, most heterosexuals do not recognize or acknowledge the fact that through the use of the terms wife or husband they have made inference that they are heterosexual, regardless of their sexual identity. Kitinger (2005) articulated how by referring to their husbands, women position themselves as wives, and by referring to their wives, men position themselves as husbands.

Likewise, the participants in this study chose to reveal their sexual identity by using attributive strategic coming out. Rather than revealing their sexual identity directly, the female participants referenced their wives, and in this case, the male participant referenced his partner. Participants viewed this form of coming out as a way to be authentic, but to place the onus of interpretation onto the receiver of the information. This implies the “normalization” of this relationship in the world of the participants and leaves the information receiver to explore it further if they are so compelled.

### **Minority Stress and Resiliency**

Minority stress theory originated under the umbrella of social stress theory (Pearlin, 1999). Minority stress is defined as the stress experienced by those who are socially discriminated against or viewed by others as disadvantaged (LeBlanc, Frost, & Wight, 2015).

Given the historical marginalization and discrimination experienced by sexual minorities in higher education and the United States, it would not have been unexpected to find the participants of this study experiencing such stress. Several discussed tumultuous experiences they had in their past coming to terms with their identity as a sexual minority and reconciling their sexual minority identity with their Christian identity. However, none of the participants discussed experiencing minority stress today. Given their previous experiences and their current age and status within their respective departments, the participant clearly developed a level of resiliency that allowed them to push through marginalizing situations and experiences to embrace a more inclusive and accepting work environment. The participants' lack of minority stress contradicts the research by Zurbrügg and Miner (2016) who found that sexual minorities overall experienced workplace incivility similar to that of heterosexuals.

When reviewing the participants, the most reasonable analysis for the lack of minority stress experienced within this group is their age, and the advantages and privileges they possess because of their age, educational level, status, and longevity as a faculty member on their current campus. Future research may present different findings about sexual minority Christian faculty who are in a different age groups, who are new to their department or campus, or who teach in the hard sciences.

### **Revisiting Intersectionality**

This study was designed utilizing the theoretical framework of intersectionality. In choosing this theoretical framework, I expected to find significant relationships and connections between the participants' identities as sexual minorities and as Christians. Further, I expected that these two identities would be nuanced in some way by the privilege of being a faculty member and also the perceptions of others with regard to their Christian privilege. On rare

occasions intersectionality appeared to emerge, such as when Francesca discussed how she is given more legitimacy and feels that she is heard better because she is a sexual minority Christian. The comments of Francesca, including the one that students can “hear her better” as a sexual minority Christian, reflects the fact that some believe the concept of a sexual minority Christian to be an oxymoron. Therefore, the expectation is that sexual minorities are atheists. It appears that being a Christian provides Francesca with more credibility among the students.

This research expanded the conceptual framework of intersectionality through the lens of academic discipline. As discussed by the participants, the decision to come out as either a sexual minority or a Christian, and the way in which they came out, was predominantly contingent on their academic field. In example, Trisha came out to her classes as sexual minority by referencing her wife in casual conversation. She selected this approach because she is unwilling to hide her life, but at the same time, she does not feel that her sexual identity is pertinent to the topics she teaches. Therefore, this disclosure does not warrant additional explanation. In contrast, many of the classes taught by Francesca, involve the deconstruction and understanding of sexual minorities. Therefore Francesca chooses to come out more directly, as a way of framing her comments and understandings of the topic. Beyond these examples, there was little evidence of intersectionality in this research.

After review of the data, the findings of this study more similarly reflect the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity as described by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007). In their model, acknowledgement is given to the different identities, recognizing that each unique identity will impact the individual in varying levels depending on their past and current circumstances and experiences. Similar to Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s findings, participants in this study viewed their identities as sexual minorities, faculty members and as Christians as

being experienced at varying levels depending on the faculty member. While most participants made a connection between their multiple identities, they were often understood only in context to their other identities. For example, as faculty, all of the participants viewed themselves as academics first, explaining that a significant amount of their identity is based on their work in the academic field, and none of the participants researched or taught classes related to their sexual minority identity or their identity as a Christian. As stated by Willie, “I treat it [sexual minority identity] as one element of my life.”

### **Implications for Higher Education**

Orozco and Allison (2008) stated that departments cannot be functional for just one or a few favored faculty members if they want to be successful. While the purpose of researching the lived experiences and the essence of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member was not to evaluate the success of the departments in which the participants are located, but the reality is that the desire for a successful academic department should be the paramount goal of academic administrators.

The findings of this study suggest sexual minority faculty, like faculty of color, are faced with cultural taxation due to the number of students and outside committees with whom or which they are asked to assist because of their identity as a sexual minority. Therefore, administrators should be aware of this additional burden placed on the faculty and acknowledge the extra efforts put forth in an effort to promote student learning and development.

Coming out in a classroom as a sexual minority or Christian for many is a way of adding pedagogical authenticity to their classes. However, for some, coming out can be a detraction from the class discussion. While either option allows the faculty member to authentically lead class, it is important for colleagues and administrators alike to be aware of the choice of the

faculty member and respect their decision by not openly or inadvertently outing them in front of students.

While many times being a sexual minority Christian is couched as the epitome of an oxymoron, the reality is that sexual minority Christian faculty have a strong ownership in their faith and their religious customs. Sexual minority Christians faculty are not only a minority due to their sexuality, but they are also a minority among the sexual minority community as Christians. As colleagues and supervisors, it is important to recognize that each sexual minority Christian faculty member has undergone a unique process to develop a personal faith. Therefore, like many Christians, their faith rituals or practices may be unique, or they may conform strictly with that of an organized religious group.

It is also important to recognize that while the faculty member may not be personally impacted by religious or political losses or gains by other members of the sexual minority community, such loss can cause pain or gladness in other members. Maintaining a supportive, inclusive environment where colleagues seek to understand the journeys of others is vital to creating a supporting and sustaining work environment. This development may include, as with other people of faith, some sexual minority Christians who may be very open to discussing their faith while others may not be. Further, the religious identity development of a sexual minority Christian most likely occurs in varying stages.

Some sexual minority Christian faculty, like other Christians, often seek out faith communities in which to be involved. These communities make a difference in the lives of sexual minority Christian faculty through their support, fellowship, and the opportunity to share in similar faith rituals. It is important for colleagues and administrators to recognize that sexual minority Christian faculty select a faith community based on numerous personal criteria. While

it is common for sexual minority Christian faculty to engage with faith communities which are open and affirming, this is not always the case. Therefore, it is important for colleagues and administrators to resist making assumptions about the congregational membership or involvement of sexual minority Christian faculty. This finding also speaks to the Christian congregations about the importance of reaching out to new faculty, to educate them on the options that exist within the community to fulfill their worship needs.

All of the sexual minority Christian faculty in this study shared accounts of collegial support, camaraderie and acceptance, regardless of their status as a Christian or a sexual minority. These findings should be seen as a call to action for any administrator or colleague to seek an understanding of others and to develop relationships based on trust, kindness and supportiveness.

The sexual minority Christian faculty in this study all utilized attributive strategic self-disclosure to add authenticity in their lives for themselves and their families. This action allows them the ability to appropriately share information that is pertinent about their lives, without the drama that is often associated with coming out. Likewise, this strategy allows sexual minority Christian faculty an avenue for sharing their preferred labeling of their spouse or significant other. Administrators and colleagues should be mindful of this strategy, recognize it as such, and employ similar language and labels.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

As mentioned in Chapter One of this document, little if any research has been conducted on the lived experiences of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member. This study is merely the genesis of more research to come on this population as well as on sexual minorities in higher education overall. It has been nearly a decade since Rankin et al. (2010) conducted a

comprehensive campus climate survey on the experiences of LGBT students, faculty and staff. Yet research articles are still being published based on those findings. The world has changed dramatically for sexual minorities since 2010, and the data sources used for academic literature should reflect that change.

While much has been learned through this study about the essence of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member, many of the findings should be used as a springboard for future studies. The demographics of the participants of this study were homogeneous, especially in the areas of age and geographic location. Further research should be done on more diverse groups to determine if the experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty are consistent across ages, academic disciplines, and geographic locations. Even though this group of five participants covered several different denominations, extending this study to include participants who identify with other denominations would certainly shed more light on the area of seeking the difference offered by a faith community.

Attributive strategic self-disclosure was one of the most unique discoveries in this study. This act can be viewed as the essence of achieved equality and acceptance or the personification of homonormativity. While the participants in this study described it as a way of being authentic yet discrete, allowing the receiver of the information to do what they wish with the information as presented, there is certainly much more to be explored about the psychological and sociological elements of this action.

While this study focused only on sexual minority Christian faculty, there is still much to be learned about sexual minority faculty of any faith. Therefore, additional research should explore the lived experiences of this group to provide a better understanding of how being a Christian is experienced differently than being Jewish or Muslim. In addition, the experience of

being able to be heard better as a Christian sexual minority versus an atheist sexual minority was brought to light in this study by one participant. This finding is worthy of further research to discover if this is consistent across the various academic fields and institutions.

Sexual minority Christian faculty make up a small but influential group on college campuses. As such, they are worthy of continued research that will inform the academic world on the environments that help sexual minority Christian faculty to thrive. This additional research will also help to create a new paradigm that identifies the current experiences of sexual minorities and sexual minority Christians on college campuses.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I strove to make meanings of my findings in relation to existing literature. The stories told by this group of faculty provide much hope that the findings of future campus climate surveys will show a resounding improvement from the past in terms of the acceptance and treatment of sexual minority Christian faculty. Faculty and administrators alike should take note of the experiences described in this study as examples of how to develop departments that are centered on collegiality and inclusiveness.



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## **Appendix A - Letter to Participants**

Dear Participant:

In partial fulfillment of the requirements to receive my Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration, I am completing a dissertation that explores the lived experiences of sexual minority Christian faculty in 4-year public institutions. As you are probably aware, the topics of sexual minority faculty and Christian faculty are only minimally explored in academic literature, and the topic of sexual minority Christian faculty is virtually non-existent. My hope is that this research will begin to open the door to the experiences had by sexual minority Christian faculty and identify new avenues of research in this area.

To complete this qualitative study, I am seeking to identify sexual minority Christian faculty members at 4-year public institutions in [name of state] to participate in this study. The total time commitment for a participant is estimated at 2 hours. The initial interview is estimated to take 60-90 minutes to complete, and an additional 30 minutes, at another time, is expected for the participant to review the transcript of the interview. To ensure convenience and confidentiality for each participant, interviews will be held at a location selected by the participant.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. If you are interested in participating, please contact Diane Hinrichs at (785) 564-1059 or via email at [dih@ksu.edu](mailto:dih@ksu.edu). Please pass this information onto anyone you know who fits the criteria of being a sexual minority Christian faculty member at 4-year public institutions in [name of state] and who might be interested in participating.

Sincerely,  
Diane Hinrichs

## Appendix B - Interview Questions

### Interview Questions – Interview #1

- 1) Please select a pseudonym that will be used in recording the results of this interview and subsequent data evaluations.
- 2) Would you chronicle your educational and work history beginning with your entry into higher education and ending with your work today?
- 3) Please share your Christian denomination affiliation and chronicle your religious history.
- 4) When asked about your sexual identity, how do you define yourself, and what label do you prefer to use?
- 5) Tell me about any classes you teach related to either being a Christian or a [sexual identity term selected]?
  - a. If so, what are these areas or classes?
  - b. If so, what types of positive or negative experiences have you had because of your choice of research these topics or teaching these courses?
  - c. If not, is there a reason you avoid those topics?
- 6) How does being a sexual minority Christian influence your decisions about what to teach?
- 7) How does being a sexual minority Christian influence your decisions about what to research?
- 8) How does being a sexual minority Christian influence your decisions about service work on campus?
- 9) Are you open with your department colleagues about your religious beliefs?
  - a. Can you describe what that level of openness looks like?
  - b. Can you describe how you “settled” on this level of openness?
  - c. Does your level of openness change regarding the College or Institution as a whole?
- 10) Are you open with your department colleagues about your sexual identity?
  - a. Can you describe what that level of openness looks like?
  - b. Can you describe how you “settled” on this level of openness?
  - c. Does your level of openness change regarding the College or Institution as a whole?
- 11) What does being a [preferred sexual identity term] Christian look and feel like at your institution and within your department?
- 12) What influence does your identity as a [preferred sexual identity term] Christian influence your work?
- 13) Please describe any groups or individuals outside of the institution who because of their actions (positive or negative) impact your work as a [preferred sexual identity term] Christian faculty member?
- 14) Is there anything else you would like to share with me, that you feel would aid my research, on the essence or lived experience of being a [preferred sexual identity term] Christian faculty member and how that identity shapes your work?

## **Interview Questions – Interview #2**

1. After having completed our first interview and reviewing the transcript from that interview is there any information that you feel is reflected inaccurately?
2. Are there any accounts in the transcript for which you would like to add detail or additional context?
3. Did the previous interview or the act of reviewing the transcript spark a recollection of any other situation that you feel would be pertinent to my research project, but was previously not included?